

“So What’s the Difference?” Talking About Race With Refugee Children in the English Language Learner Classroom

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This study examines how an English language learner (ELL) educator negotiated conversations about the intersectional nature of race in an elementary ELL classroom using a critical literacy framework. Few studies examine the ways in which teachers of young children negotiate conversations about the complexities of race with their students. Even fewer address the way in which African refugee children can explore the contested nature of racial labeling as a part of language instruction in the classroom. The students in this study experienced a history of persecution and displacement in Somalia in the 1990s. Their experiences in Somalia, relocation to refugee camps in Kenya, and finally relocation to the United States exposed their families to the very real impact of static and stereotypical notions of race. Through the lens of critical literacy, classroom interactions and activities are analyzed through one cycle of literacy events in an ELL classroom. Findings show that ELL educators can explore the contested nature of racial identities in ways that support and enhance language instruction. Findings also highlight the complexities of immigrant and refugee identity positions, even among members of the same group.

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Abdullah and Omar, two fourth-grade Somali Bantu refugee students, are listening to a read-aloud (Wolf, 2004) of *Grandfather’s Journey* (Say, 1993) by their teacher, Ms. Rios. As is customary in Ms. Rios’s English language learner (ELL) classroom,

students are invited to ask questions and explore personal connections to the story, particularly when she pauses between pages of the open book. As Ms. Rios reads from a page, the following discussion occurs:

Ms. Rios: (reading from *Grandfather's Journey*) He met many people along the way. He shook hands with black men and white men, with yellow men, and red men.

Omar: (interrupts Ms. Rios) There's the black man right *there* (points to the black man).

Abdullah: What he means about red men?

Ms. Rios: Good question, Abdullah. Sometimes people describe Native American people as having red skin.

Abdullah: He looks brown.

Ms. Rios: Yeah, those labels can be confusing sometimes. Let's revisit that after I read some more (continues reading).

In this brief segment of classroom discourse, it is evident that Omar and Abdullah, two elementary-aged ELL students, noticed the author's and illustrator's use of color as an identity marker and had questions about the accuracy and purpose of these labels. All too often, opportunities to engage in conversations about race are missed or left to the periphery in classroom discourse, especially in elementary contexts. Omar and Abdullah's responses, however, indicate that children notice and have questions about constructions of racial identities in the classroom artifacts to which they are exposed. Through one cycle of literacy events in an ELL newcomer classroom, this study shows how teachers who draw from critical literacy perspectives can create a permeable curriculum (Dyson, 1993; Gritter, 2012) that offers multiple identity possibilities to ELL students and creates opportunities for students to discuss and explore these identities. Further, this study shows the impact of teachers' experiences in shaping the conversations that happen around racial identity.

Children's literature and the texts that children are exposed to in classrooms are historical, cultural, and political products. Through these textual artifacts and the discussion that occurs around them, ELL students are presented with a variety of subject positions that can affirm, validate, challenge, or oppose students' emerging identities and socialize them to the way in which these identities are

viewed in U.S. schools (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). When children have responses to texts, such as those displayed by Omar and Abdullah, educators can choose to engage these topics or ignore them. In this study, the ELL teacher chose to make students' questions about race and immigration central to the study of language and content by taking a critical literacy perspective (Leland, Harste, & Shockley, 2007; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). In order to understand the benefits and challenges of this approach, this study was guided by the following questions: What identities and positions are offered, taken up, and explored through critical literacy practices in an ELL classroom? What role(s) does the teacher play in facilitating meaning making in critical conversations about race and immigration during literacy events in an ELL classroom?

Using Heath's (1982) original definition of a *literacy event* as one in which a text or texts are "integral to participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 93), this study operationalizes Heath's definition by focusing on interactional discourse between Somali Bantu students and their ELL teacher as they co-construct meaning through a cycle of literacy events that included classroom discourse, a picture book, and film segments. The interactional discourse during a cycle of literacy events shows how literacy practices function to bring culturally dominant influences relating to identity into local literacy events (Street, 2003) and recognizes the transcontextualizing capabilities (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Reder & Davila, 2005) of everyday literacy events—merging the local and global context in the classroom.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL LITERACY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXTS

Critical literacy (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Leland et al., 2007; Luke & Dooley, 2011; Vasquez, 2004) acknowledges the situated nature of language, interrogates power relationships, and can make visible the identities and subject positions negotiated in a classroom context. Whereas traditional literacy instruction is often associated with skills-based teaching, critical literacy provides a framework for asking critical and thought-provoking questions that relate to the reader and society (Van Sluys et al., 2006). The

discussion of how power is enacted and interrogated through texts is central to this practice (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). The term *text* is widely defined to include classroom discourse, literature, and other artifacts and practices used in the teaching of literacy. When teachers take a critical literacy approach, they call attention to how texts are influenced by the sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopolitical context (Au, 1993; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Heath, 1983). Vasquez (2004) explains that these critical or controversial conversations in the classroom are often “associated with cynicism and unpleasurable work” (p. 30) or are deemed tangential to the real work of the classroom. In ELL classrooms in particular, functional approaches to literacy are often privileged (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002) over more critical ones. Discussing race, for example, from a critical perspective is often seen as too advanced or inappropriate for young learners. Rong and Brown (2001), however, assert that Black immigrant and refugee children, in particular, are presented with notions of race in their everyday lives as they navigate a U.S. society that claims a postracial identity but continues to reinforce static notions of blackness and brownness in the public sphere.

The ELL classroom is where immigrant students often experience their first taste of the U.S. educational system. It is, by definition, an English language learning context in which students are expected to speak, read, and write in English. Instruction is typically aimed at developing English grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills (Minaya-Rowe, 2008). Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez (2002) suggest that “in learning how to speak, they [children] also learn how to think, how to comport themselves, and even how to feel and how to express (or otherwise manage) those feelings” (p. 342). This is even more evident in classrooms where immigrant children are also expected to learn how to acclimate to the United States. ELL classrooms become sites for not only language study, but socialization, implicit or explicit, to particular ideologies about what it means to be American, an immigrant, or a person of color, for example. In this way, practices such as labeling people (e.g., Black, White, brown, immigrant) is neither neutral nor benign, but can lead to a process of internalization of dominant or reductionist beliefs about

ELLs (Razfar, 2003), acceptance of dominant ideologies of anti-immigrant groups and anti-bilingual language ideologies (Martínez-Roldán & Malavé, 2004), and/or static notions of the varying identities of immigrants. According to van Dijk (1996), ideologies are the foundation of the social beliefs that can legitimize, resist, or interrupt the existing power hierarchy and promote various group interests over others. For this reason, group members in diverse school contexts can interrogate and discuss ideologies to “guide their interpretations, discourses and other social practices in a specific social domain, for instance, in race relations” (van Dijk, 1996, p. 8). Critical literacy provides a framework for engaging in this process of deconstructing these ideologies and identities in the classroom.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The research context for this study is an urban, elementary, ELL classroom in south Texas with Somali Bantu refugee students. At the time of the study, the focal elementary school, Centro Elementary (pseudonym) had a student population of 735, which consisted primarily of students from working- to middle-class families with a majority Latina/o background. Specifically, district documents reported demographics of the school as 71% Latina/o, 16% African American, 9% White, and 4% designated as “other.” The Somali Bantu refugee students were counted within the African American percentage. This type of reporting is problematic because it ascribes the same identity to African refugees and African Americans, rendering invisible distinctly different histories and language experiences in the United States (Appiah, 1996), and also speaks to how static notions of race continue to be perpetuated by school and government agencies.

In relation to socioeconomic distinctions, approximately 79% of the students at Centro Elementary were labeled economically disadvantaged and 38% were labeled limited English proficient (LEP). Additionally, the school had a 54% mobility rate, which created distinct challenges for delivering responsive and consistent language programs. To address this need, Centro Elementary offered a variety of language programs, including Spanish/English bilingual education, mainstream English education, a push-in ELL

program, and a pull-out ELL program. The Somali Bantu students were placed in a pull-out ELL program, where students were removed from their homeroom for specialized instruction for 1 to 3 hours each day. Students were typically grouped by grade level, though some multigrade instruction occurred when ELL teachers conducted read-alouds.

Two fourth-grade students, Omar and Abdullah, and their teacher, Ms. Rios (all pseudonyms), are the focal participants of this case. Omar and Abdullah were often pulled out of their mainstream classroom to meet with Ms. Rios for small-group instruction in the ELL classroom. Both students displayed an eagerness to spend as much time as possible in Ms. Rios's classroom.

Abdullah and Omar arrived in the United States in 2004 after their families spent nearly 12 years in refugee camps in Kenya as a result of civil war in Somalia. Both Omar and Abdullah had limited and interrupted schooling in the refugee camps. By their third year in the United States, Abdullah and Omar were reading in English at the first-grade level as fourth graders. This created challenges because substantial reading was required in fourth-grade content areas such as social studies and science. Given these increased expectations, some researchers argue for the need to document and understand how students engage in classroom talk during and after literacy instruction (Allington, Johnston, & Day, 2002; Applebee, 1996; Servis, 1999).

Ms. Rios, the focal teacher, was a second-year teacher when the Somali Bantu students arrived in south Texas and a fourth-year teacher at the time of this study. Ms. Rios's training as a bilingual educator at a south Texas university and her personal experiences as a Mexican American growing up in the U.S. borderlands were reflected in her identity stances and teaching. Ms. Rios was intentional and explicit in her goal of bringing critical conversations into the classroom. She held high expectations of her ELL students and believed that the curriculum needed to be culturally relevant in order to be effective. Ms. Rios spent time with the Somali Bantu students outside of school, getting to know their families and teaching English classes to Somali Bantu adults. She used this time with her students' families to gather data and plan ELL instruction that built on students' background

knowledge. As the ELL teacher, she was responsible for student improvement of English language and literacy skills, but often emphasized that a new language cannot be acquired without a motivating and interesting curriculum. Most of the ELL instruction in Ms. Rios's classroom involved small-group work consisting of two to six students. Although this study focuses on a close analysis of one cycle of literacy events in Ms. Rios's classroom with Omar and Abdullah, it serves as a telling case of the types of interactions and activities Ms. Rios engaged in throughout the year and as an example of how conversations about racial identities can be approached with young children through literature and film.

RESEARCH METHODS

The case presented extends work from a larger, year-long study examining the language and literacy practices of Somali Bantu refugee families in south Texas (Roy, 2008). I used participant observation and field note-taking (Spradley, 1980) to examine the school and community where most of the Somali Bantu families lived in order to contextualize analysis of classroom interactions and literacy events. I collected classroom talk through video and audio recording and field notes in both the classroom and community. Human subject permission was obtained from family, school, and community members. I conducted semistructured and informal interviews with Somali Bantu families, children, and their educators in addition to the classroom data collection.

As is ordinary in many elementary classrooms, read-aloud literacy events typically consist of an oral reading of a teacher-selected text with prereading, during reading, and after reading subevents (Wolf, 2004) and are a recommended practice for ELLs and struggling readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Lenski, Ehlers-Zavala, Daniel, & Sun-Irminger, 2011). The analysis of a classroom discourse, a read-aloud, and film segments in this study are treated as a cycle of literacy events, discussed "in an analytic sense of tied events" (Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2005, p. 168) to understand the instructional and discursive choices made by the teacher and students. The findings are organized by highlighting a series of connected literacy events as a telling case of how instructional and discursive choices made offered spaces for multiple identity possibilities.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Ms. Rios intentionally designed her ELL instruction from a critical literacy perspective, choosing texts that would elicit critical conversations related to students' lived experiences as a way to improve students' reading and writing in English. The first event in the cycle was a read-aloud of the picture book *Grandfather's Journey* (Say, 1993), which was a recommended text in the school's curriculum. This book retraces the journey of a Japanese immigrant arriving in the United States who then returns to Japan years later. The story is told from the perspective of the grandson, two generations later. Ms. Rios selected the book to spur conversations about life-changing journeys (both emotional and geographical) and to illuminate untold stories of migration. Her goal was to elicit expanded oral discourse by building on prior knowledge (students' own journey from the refugee camps in Kenya to the United States) and at the same time teach students about other stories of migration to the United States. The theme of journeys also reinforced the required grade-level content area objectives for both literacy and social studies standards. The second activity involved the viewing of clips from the documentary *Rain in a Dry Land* (Makepeace, 2006), which chronicles the experiences of Somali Bantu families within the new African diaspora. Ms. Rios chose the film for its cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994) and as a way to supplement the themes identified in the read-aloud with *Grandfather's Journey* (Say, 1993). Finally, Ms. Rios planned writing activities that involved reflective writing and responses to the book and film. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the types of activities that occurred in the cycle of literacy events.

CRITICAL LITERACY OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE STANDARDS AND OBJECTIVES

A common trope used against infusing critical literacy in the classroom is that teachers must first address the pressures of high-stakes testing and standards demands. During the cycle of literacy events, however, Ms. Rios addressed local, state, and national

TABLE 1. Cycle of Activities With *Grandfather's Journey* and *Rain in a Dry Land*

	Activities	Literate actions	Textual characteristics	
Linked literacy events	Prereading	Making predictions	Visual cues from story cover	
		"Reading" illustrations	Illustrations for picture walk	
		Discussing key concepts	<i>Journey</i> and <i>chronology</i> as key terms	
	Reading <i>Grandfather's Journey</i>	Listening	One voice reading of book	
		Responding to story elements	Language use	
		Questioning	Character descriptions	
		Inferencing	Character actions	
		Comparing journeys	Challenges and resolutions	
		Postreading: <i>Rain in a Dry Land</i>	Viewing	Video mode
			Comparing characters	Different voices for characters
	Comparing events		Journey and chronology reinforced	
	Connecting to self		Different perspectives	
		Connecting to family	Discussion	
		Connecting to world	Reflecting and writing	

standards for fourth-grade learners (e.g., chronology of events, migration, reading and writing to learn) through texts that elicited students' background knowledge and, at the same time, infused critical literacy practices. Vasquez (2004) affirms that, with careful attention, educators can engage in critical literacy pedagogy and make instruction relevant to students within the mandated standards and curricula.

For example, Ms. Rios explored the topic of chronology and journey by asking students to put story events and personal journeys in order over time, to think about their own journeys in relation to others' experiences, and to present individual thinking in oral classroom discourse. Further, during the read-

aloud, Ms. Rios and her students stopped to clarify and discuss important vocabulary and question the text (see introductory segment of talk). Ms. Rios asked students to reflect on the grandfather's transnational experiences between Japan and the United States, to compare and contrast his experiences with their own personal knowledge of transnationalism, and to identify the chronology of events during the grandfather's journeys as well as during their own journeys. Comparing and contrasting transnational experiences served to bring distant influences into the construction of local literacy events, an example that elucidates literacy's transcontextualizing capabilities to bring local and global contexts into the everyday literacy event and provides an example of a critical literacy approach.

Using film to supplement themes embedded in literacy activities is a recommended practice for elementary school students (Yenawine, 1997). Ms. Rios used the film to provide another concrete example of the journey concept and to prompt students to discuss their own lived experiences. The film, *Rain in a Dry Land*, traces the experiences of two Somali Bantu families and their journey from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya to the United States. The families in the film arrived in the United States around the same time as the students in this study. Although they were relocated in different cities, their experiences were very similar to the experiences of students in the class. Ms. Rios chose not to show the entire film, but rather to focus on excerpts that pertained to the initial journey and acclimation to the school context, thus reinforcing concepts of chronology and journeys. In her own words, "I wanted to focus on the journey aspect of the film, especially the school part because I knew the kids could relate to it" (Teacher interview, Ms. Rios, November 25, 2007). In this way, the film had potential for eliciting extended oral discourse in English from the Somali Bantu students because connections could be made to the transnational experiences of the protagonist in *Grandfather's Journey* as well as with their own transnational experiences.

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACIAL IDENTITIES

After reading *Grandfather's Journey*, Ms. Rios moved on to the film activity. Given students' interest in how people were labeled by "color" in the book, Ms. Rios carefully chose three clips from the film that would potentially extend their conversation about racial labeling. First, she showed a clip of the Somali Bantu families in Africa learning about life in the United States. Next, she showed a clip of families arriving in the United States and learning how to shop for groceries in their neighborhood. Finally, she showed a clip where several Somali Bantu children were being introduced to the U.S. school context. While watching these clips, there was much back-channeling in relation to the Somali Bantu families in the film. Omar and Abdullah responded with "yeah, we did that," "uh huh," "my dad did that," "oh yeah, I remember that," showing they identified with the experiences of the families in the film.

The final clip elicited more than back-channeling responses, just as Ms. Rios had predicted. In this film clip, there is a 2-minute dialogue between two elementary-aged African American students, one of which is giving a school tour to a new Somali Bantu student. The dialogue in the film sets the stage for the classroom discourse between Omar, Abdullah, and Ms. Rios as it relates to racial identities and provides insight into how Ms. Rios helped the students build on their questions about racial labeling.

"So What's the Difference?"

In the film, a female African American student (AF1) and a new male Somali Bantu student (SBM) are walking through the schoolyard. AF1 is giving SBM a tour. Another African American female student (AF2) of approximately the same age (9 to 11 years old) enters the frame and the following exchange occurs.

(Dialogue excerpt from the film *Rain in a Dry Land* [Makepeace, 2006])

315 AF2: I want to be in the camera too. (*walks alongside AF1*)

316 AF1: No! You're not an African. You got to be an African.

(*continues walking*)

- 317 AF2: I am!
318 AF1: No, you're not! Is she African? (asks the male Somali Bantu student)
319 AF2: I *am* African American! (frowns)
320 AF1: No, you're not!
321 SBM: She's African American.
322 AF1: You're *lying*! (speaking to AF2)
323 AF2: Uh huh, I'm brown. See? I'm brown. (holds out her own arm and points to her own skin)
324 AF1: Everybody is black in the whole school so what are you talking about?

In this film clip, the students are negotiating what constitutes being African, African American, Black, and brown. AF2 maintains an inclusive affiliation between *African* and *African American*, while AF1 denies this assertion of a “hyphenated” identity and its relationship to her definition of *African*. The Somali Bantu student expresses uncertainty. AF2 asserts that phenotypical characteristics prove Africanness as she holds out her arm, declaring, “I’m brown. See? I’m brown.” AF1, however, suggests that everyone in the school is “Black” and implies that one’s phenotype (i.e., being brown or black) is not necessarily about being African or African American. This dilemma among the children in the film represents the larger conversation about the complexities of racial identifying. The segment from the film sparked immediate laughter and comments from Abdullah and Omar. In fact, they laughed so loud that Ms. Rios stopped the film clip to provide an opportunity for discussing what was heard thus far. The following discussion occurred:

- 325 Abdullah: (laughs loudly)
326 Omar: *What?* What? (laughs) (showing confusion about the argument in the film)
327 Ms. Rios: They [the African American students] want to be in the camera. Why couldn't they be on the camera?
328 Omar: Because they are not African.
329 Ms. Rios: But, they *are* African. Didn't you hear what she was saying? (referring to AF2)
330 Omar: She thinks she's an African but she's not.

- 331 Ms. Rios: So what's the difference?
332 Omar: I guess just because she's brown doesn't mean she's an African.
333 Ms. Rios: But what's the difference? What's the difference? Can you explain it to me?

In this excerpt, Ms. Rios demonstrated her intention for students to produce extended oral discourse, an integral part of language learning, through probing questions (lines 331 and 333). These probing questions align with critical literacy practices in that they ask students to question assertions made in the text in order to cultivate critical thinking. This questioning provided Omar with an opportunity to explain his thinking related to racial identities and affiliations, which was elaborated on as the discussion continued.

- 334 Ms. Rios: OK, let me ask you this: When you have kids are they going to be African?
335 Omar: Yes.
336 Abdullah: No.
337 Ms. Rios: But they are born in America?
338 Omar: *So!* They are going to be *African!*
339 Ms. Rios: They could be African what?
340 Abdullah: African American.
341 Ms. Rios: Ah! So that little girl that was on the TV; she's African American so...
342 Abdullah: I think she's from Africa but she was born in America.
343 Ms. Rios: She was probably born in America, yeah.
344 Omar: But her skin is brown. They think that's African.

Although Ms. Rios's question, asking students to hypothesize their future parental practices, may be far removed from the current realities of fourth graders, it provides insight into Ms. Rios's attempt to guide students to think critically about the acculturation process and its impact on identity formation across generations. It also begins to reveal Ms. Rios's own orientation in relation to hyphenated identities (lines 341, 343). Rather than shift his stance, Omar maintains the distinction between being African and being African American. Even though he was unwilling at that point in their interactions to consider the personal merits of a

hyphenated or hybrid identity label, Omar was explicit that phenotype and location of birth made a difference to him as to how people from Africa are labeled. The film and interactions in class also showed him that this issue of identity is a contested domain. In fact, the majority Latina/o population in the school he now attended and in the community in which he now lived had many brown students. This newcomer experience may have factored into Omar's stance about phenotype and identity in terms of being African. In the next excerpt, Omar added a new identity marker to the discussion:

- 350 Omar: Yeah, but they can't even talk Maay Maay! (Omar's first language)
351 Ms. Rios: But maybe they forgot it because their family has been in America for a long long time? Their journey was a long time ago. (shrugs and smiles)
352 Abdullah: (laughs)
353 Omar: How they can forget? If they are African they can't forget.

The intersectional nature of race, language, and national identity is brought to the forefront by Omar's statement "but they can't even talk Maay Maay," his first language. When Omar asserted that language indexes racial identity, Ms. Rios nudged the discussion further by inferring that linguistic identities change, particularly when (im)migrant journeys are historical events in a family's chronology across generations (line 351). In this way, Ms. Rios provided a question that probed into the realities of immigration experiences. Because Omar, at that point, could not fathom the fact that an African could forget his or her language (line 353), even across generations, Ms. Rios continued by sharing her lived experience as a Mexican American daughter as an example in the following segment:

- 354 Ms. Rios: Did you know that my dad is from Mexico? My dad speaks Spanish. Why didn't my brothers learn Spanish?
355 Omar: Because they were born over here. (in the United States)
356 Ms. Rios: I was born over here too actually.
357 Omar: Your dad teach you and he didn't teach them.
358 Ms. Rios: Oh, my dad taught me and he didn't teach them? Hm. OK, so what if the little girl's parents (in the film) or

grandparents weren't able to teach them? They might have known Maay Maay or another African language but she doesn't know it?

- 359 Abdullah: I think she can ask her mom.
360 Ms. Rios: Does that make me Mexican American and my brothers *just* American because they don't know Spanish?
361 Abdullah: No!
362 Omar: (shrugs)
363 Ms. Rios: Or are they Mexican American also?
364 Abdullah: They are *all* Mexican American.

In this excerpt, Ms. Rios revealed her own lived experiences related to language loss and identity, but did not discuss racial affiliation. Instead, she asked questions based on her own experiential framework of language loss in the U.S. borderlands. These questions about language loss perplexed Omar and Abdullah. For example, they wanted to know why her father did not teach Spanish to his sons and why her mother was not a linguistic teaching resource (lines 357, 358, 359). In line 360, Ms. Rios extends the conversation by asking a critical question about identity and language loss, inquiring whether her brothers lose their hyphenated Mexican American identity if they are unable to speak Spanish. She also asks, are they "*just* American because they don't know Spanish?" The use of "*just*" as a modifier for American suggests that Ms. Rios privileges an additive or hyphenated identity. As the discussion continues, Abdullah and Omar's connections mark an evolving understanding of hybrid identities and Ms. Rios's position about hybrid identities becomes clear:

- 365 Abdullah: Like the grandfather [in the book] is Japanese, and he went to America and he teach the grandson.
366 Ms. Rios: The grandson knew English and Japanese. He can be Japanese and American, right? Great connection. Sometimes different generations experience different things. Sometimes we remember our languages and teach them to our children and sometimes we don't.
367 Abdullah: Yeah, my sister, she speaks Swahili and doesn't speak Maay Maay and she forgot Maay Maay.
368 Ms. Rios: Yes, excellent connection. Also, sometimes when we don't speak a language for a long time we can forget some of it.
369 Omar: Like that girl (from the film).

While *Grandfather's Journey* does not discuss the grandfather teaching the grandson Japanese, Abdullah made this implied connection. In line 366, Ms. Rios gave purposeful examples of the many possibilities for language maintenance or loss among generations in a family and at the same time confirmed her orientation toward a hybrid identity. This information sparked a text-to-life connection for Abdullah in relation to her sister. In line 367, Abdullah expressed her understanding of language loss by providing an example in her own life. Since the Somali Bantu spent nearly 12 years in refugee camps in Kenya, many families also learned Swahili, the national language of Kenya, in addition to their Bantu language, Maay Maay. In the case of Abdullah's sister, Swahili became her dominant language because she remained in Kenya rather than moving with the rest of Abdullah's family to the United States. Abdullah's insertion of her lived experience and Ms. Rios's validation of this comment prompted Omar to recall the girl from the film in line 369, "like that girl." In and through the talk, Omar began to vocalize understanding of the possibilities of different realities for refugees and U.S.-born children of immigrants and the intersectional relationship between race, immigration, displacement, and language loss.

Intersections of Racial Identities

The cycle of literacy events concluded with a writing activity in which students were able to reflect on and expand their conceptions of identities as they relate to being African, African American, and Black in the United States. When prompted to "speak back" to the author and filmmaker, both Omar and Abdullah suggested that more clarification and nuance is needed when identifying people by color. Abdullah wondered, "Why he [the author] don't just say where the people are from?" Omar expressed a need to talk to the students featured in the film. He rationalized that if the filmmaker would have asked the Bantu families about race, blackness and brownness would be clearer. To be sure, Omar had firm ideas of who is African, and skin color

was only a small piece of the conversation. He stated, “When they make the movie, why they didn’t tell the girls [the African American girls in the film] that if you are African, you have to speak African language?” (referring to Maay Maay, Swahili, or other languages spoken in Africa).

Another important component of the racial identity conversation was revealed in Abdullah and Omar’s reflective writing. Abdullah wrote about the bilingual nature of her tribal identity: “Bantus speak English also and some Spanish” and “Being Bantu is special to me.” Omar wrote, “Maay Maay is my language and I am Bantu from Africa.” Neither Abdullah nor Omar signaled a hyphenated identity explicitly, but both affirmed their position taken in classroom talk. Abdullah affirmed the evolving identity of “being Bantu” in the United States—that is, speaking English and some Spanish and expressing her affinity for her Bantu identity. Omar, on the other hand, was more explicit in signaling his current perspective on the relationship between nationality and language. The conversation about what it means to “be Bantu” was not elaborated in classroom discourse, perhaps signaling Western misconceptions that privilege national identity over local or tribal ones in U.S. schooling contexts.

DISCUSSION

In and through the cycle of literacy events, the stances and evolving understandings of racial identities of two Somali Bantu students and their Mexican American teacher were presented. *Grandfather’s Journey*, an autobiographical text about a Japanese immigrant, provided a context for discussing and responding to journeys from a critical intergenerational perspective in this classroom, and the video clips from *Rain in a Dry Land* provided a context for discussing and responding to journeys from a multiple-identities perspective. Both texts provided opportunities to critically examine contested identities that can be ascribed, rejected, or accepted when journeys take us to a new nation, a new language, and new ways of being. The discourse also provided a window into the complexities of immigrant and refugee experiences, even among members from the same racial, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic group. Moreover, the critical literacy stance

taken by the teacher created windows of opportunity for students to question the nature of these identities in the classroom context. In this way, a critical literacy stance involved “looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it, and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement” (Vasquez, 2004, p. 30) or, in this case, space for differing opinions and stances about the intersectional nature of racial identities. And, as Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) suggest, we live *in* and *through* identities that are developed through our everyday social practices such as those that occur in schools.

Ms. Rios played an important role in making ideologies and identities worthy of discussion in the newcomer class through her critical literacy stance. She valued her students’ experiences and drew on their knowledge in order to increase not only their English language skills but their critical thinking and questioning skills. Rather than depositing information about journeys for the students, she elicited responses by the types of questions she asked and by sharing her own lived experiences—a critical tenet in cultivating critical literacy. She also provided a strong model of how to contribute to literary discussions by providing evidence from the texts. Ms. Rios modeled ways to engage conversations related to race while validating each class member’s point of view. Because Ms. Rios asked questions that prompted her students to infer their own meanings and was careful not to overload with her own personal contributions, the interactions provided a firm foundation for Abdullah and Omar to better understand their own and their families’ acculturation process.

Although Ms. Rios wanted the students to consider the idea of an inclusive view of being African, it was also clear that her orientation leaned toward a hyphenated or hybrid identity, reflecting her own familial experiences with being Mexican American and living in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Without Ms. Rios’s explicit questions and contributions, Abdullah, for example, may not have asserted her views about hyphenated identities or experience with language loss among members of her family. Ms. Rios also allowed space for resisting hyphenated or hybrid identities. At the end of the cycle of activity, Omar was still

conflicted by the possibility of a hyphenated identity because he was not yet sure how to add an identity without giving up any part of his African identity. On the other hand, Omar was able to fathom the possibility of language loss across generations after engaging in the discussion.

Ms. Rios's orientation toward hyphenated identities also shows her orientation toward biculturalism and her training as a bilingual educator. Assuming a bicultural identity is considered a healthier sociocultural orientation for immigrants and refugees, following the idea that one does not have to give up one identity for another (Suarez-Orozco, 2004), Ms. Rios advocated this position. Although African American may appear more inclusive to some, recent African immigrants and refugees do not have the same sociohistorical experiences as U.S. Blacks (Rong & Brown, 2002). Similarly, as Omar expressed, many recent African immigrants and refugees may not identify with African Americans and vice versa. In this way, Ms. Rios's additive orientation to identities could be problematic. On one level, she is supporting biculturalism, but on another, supporting the official practice of labeling African refugees as African American, which is contradictory. She, in some ways, minimizes being "just" African and pushes for hybrid identities, an identity that Omar and other Somali Bantu refugees may or may not want to accept. Thus, advocating a hybrid identity could be viewed, in part, as assimilative or majoritarian in this context. This punctuates the need to move beyond static views of identities and different ways of knowing and being. Further, this study affirms, as Vasquez (2004) confirmed in her own work, that a critical literacy stance is neither cynical nor unpleasurable. Rather, critical conversations about the intersectionality of racial identities, for example, can affirm, validate, and enhance literacy instruction in ways that strengthen academic, personal, and social goals.

CONCLUSION

During a cycle of literacy events in an ELL newcomer classroom, the Somali Bantu students were given a variety of opportunities to explore their ideologies and identities and discuss them with their teacher. This study illuminates that, with the passage of time and

adaptation to a new life, some refugee students like Omar remain firm in their stances (e.g., maintenance of heritage language and racial/ethnic affiliation) whereas other students, like Abdullah, consider the possibility of hybrid identities. These diverse responses show the potential variety of stances that can be expressed within one group of students from the same linguistic and cultural background.

The teacher in this study, through her critical literacy stance, played an integral role in cultivating students' identity possibilities through critical literacy practices. The teacher took a critical approach to exploring the intersectional nature of race. That said, her bicultural orientation was evident in her push for a conclusion based on her own experiences, which could, in the students' case, reflect a more assimilative identity. Regardless of the ultimate choice made by participants, Ms. Rios modeled ways to make space for questions about race and engage young children in conversations that are sometimes deemed controversial and/or unpleasant.

This study shows how refugee students were a central axis in extended discourse related to the intersectional nature of racial identities and acculturation. The children shaped their own and each other's ideas and trajectories as they explored their journey from the refugee camps in Kenya to the United States. They were able to accomplish this, in part, because of the critical literacy perspective assumed by the teacher. The conclusions made by participants are not intended to provide static explanations or Somali Bantu families' (or other groups') beliefs about race, ethnicity, and language. Rather, the findings provide a window into the way in which these labels are and can be negotiated and discussed with young children and ELL classrooms while also meeting language and content objectives. This work also shows explicitly, through discourse, how teachers can conduct conversations about race, ethnicity, and language use in ways that honor children's perspectives. Further, teachers can use this approach as a model for how to elicit discourse from their students through literature, film, and open dialogue.

Overall, this study has important implications for how we think about hyphenated or hybrid identities. Questions about race

and the complexity of labels based loosely on socially constructed ideas about phenotype can and should be brought to the forefront in classrooms, even at the elementary level. Teachers should be afforded opportunities in their teacher education programs and in professional development to consider how critical literacy can enhance and extend their literacy instruction. Given the ever-increasing emphasis on standards and standardization, critical literacy practices provide a way to address and go beyond functional approaches.

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