

## Making Sense of Literacy Landscapes: A Case study of a Sudanese Refugee Child's Literacy Practices in America

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## Who is Boni?

- n A 5-year-old kindergartner living in mid-Michigan
- n The child of refugees from the Sudan
  - q Boni's parents hold college degrees
  - q 3 younger brothers
- n Fluent in Arabic; near-fluent in English

## Theoretical Framework

- n Literacy is an ideological social practice
  - q Literacy practices are multiple and purposeful, and some are privileged above others (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Street, 2001, 2005)
  - q Literacy is deeply enmeshed in social, cultural & power structures
  - q Individuals use varying agentive responses to dominant literacy practices (Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005)
    - n e.g., refusing to turn in homework = resistance

## Theoretical Framework

- n Non-Westerners are often viewed through Western literacy lenses (Street, 2001; Rogers, 2001)
- n Different models of literacy often clash in the formal school setting
  - q Schools use an "autonomous" model, where literacy is singular, universal, and neutral (Street, 2001)

## Research Questions

- n How is Boni making sense of the multiple ways of doing literacy, particularly those related to formal schooling?
- n What does school literacy mean to Boni in the context of his home?

## Methodology: Researcher Role

- n Lived in Lesotho, Africa for two years
- n Participated in the Sudanese community for 3 years
  - q Tutor, family mentor, community board member
- n Reciprocity for families
  - q Homework help, cultural brokering/mentoring

## Methodology

- n **DATA COLLECTION:**
  - q Participant observation
    - n 21 observations from Feb-June 2005
  - q Informal interviews
    - n Boni & Viola
  - q Artifact collection
    - n Samples of Boni's writing, teacher feedback, assessments
- n **DATA ANALYSIS:**
  - q Coding fieldnotes and artifacts
    - n Texts used
    - n Activities around texts
    - n Contextual information
    - n Themes
  - q Creating data matrix

## Findings: Many Tensions

- n Boni's sense-making around literacy involved three primary tensions:
  - q Observed skills/practices versus teacher feedback about skills/abilities
  - q Talking about school versus "talking school"
  - q Resistance versus engagement/self-challenge

## Observed practices vs. teacher feedback

- n A variety of emergent literacy practices:
  - q Spelling people's names
  - q Identifying initial sounds of words
  - q Writing the alphabet and numbers
  - q Pretend reading a variety of texts
- n Teacher feedback:
  - q Focused on what Boni couldn't do
  - q Discrepancies between school assessments and what Boni regularly did at home

## Talking about school vs. "talking school"

- n Talking about school
  - q Fascination with the local university
  - q Ambivalence to elementary school
  - q Viola's discussions of school in Sudan
- n Taking on the discourse of schooling
  - q Teacher-like talk: beginning sounds, scribbling
  - q Ideology: doing homework, reading

## Resistance vs. engagement and self-challenge

- n Resisting homework:
  - q "I'm busy"—finding other activities
  - q Rejection of reading
- n Challenging himself:
  - q Novel ways to complete math homework
  - q Games, races
  - q Fascination with my writing

## Discussion

- n Boni resisted school-based literacy practices...
  - q e.g., homework, storybook-reading
- n ...but accepted those from his home life
  - q e.g., religious texts, my writing
- n Boni also resisted activities he could not control

## Discussion

- n Internalization of discourses of schooling chafed with Boni's actual experience
- n Wrestling with conflict between ideology and identity
  - q "If *you* do homework a lot, *you* can learn everything"
  - q "I don't like to do this" and "I'm BUSY!"

## Implications for Practice

- n Complicates many stereotypes about African refugees
- n Children's actual frames of reference are important
  - q e.g., storybook reading is not on cultural "radar"
- n School-based assessments may not reflect a child's full literacy spectrum
  - q Autonomous models miss a lot of children's meaningful literacy practices

## Implications for Theory

- n Inauthentic learning experiences → resistance
- n Small resistance → larger resistance
  - q Boni's acts of resistance are relatively minor now, but have potentially serious consequences IF they continue
  - q Boni's skin color, gender, status as an African refugee, and his first language all complicate his resistance