

## Marginality Within Literacy Classrooms: Young Sudanese Refugee Children

Kristen H. Perry  
Michigan State University



## Storytelling

- “The postmodernist goal is...to encourage the author to present a less tidy picture with more contradictory voices and to encourage the reader to take more responsibility for puzzling out what is really going on in Wiliwililand.”

--Margery Wolf in *A Thrice Told Tale*

## The Context

- A study of three Sudanese refugee families
- Data collection:
  - 18 months with family/community
  - 2005-2006 school year in classrooms
- Participant observation, interviews, artifact collection

## The Domoulouka/Lupai Family

- Refugees from southern Sudan
- Languages: Arabic & English
- Highly educated parents
  - Viola earned law degree in Egypt
  - Isbon attended some college
- Parents work in low-skilled jobs
  - Isbon: housekeeping at local hospital
  - Viola: manufactures electronic car parts

## A Tale of Two Brothers



## Boni



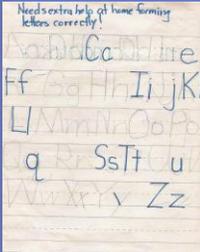
- “Mr. Personality”
- Struggling academically
  - Still reading at pre-first grade level
  - Recommended for retention

## Samuel



- “Mr. Serious”
- Thriving academically
  - Enjoys reading
  - Prolific writer

## Boni: Teacher Feedback



- Kindergarten teacher:
  - “has trouble”
  - “always behind”
  - “He’s smart, but...”
- First-grade teacher:
  - “He has the best printing in our class!”

## Boni: Peripheral First-Grader

- Mrs. W and the Lost Boys
  - Foster mother for three orphaned refugee youth from Southern Sudan
- Mrs. W’s perspective:
  - “It’s really hard for me to keep Boni going, and I can’t hold my class back just for him.”

## Boni: Peripheral First-Grader

- Getting “help” from an advanced peer
  - “That is SO sloppy!”
- Small-group work with paraprofessional
  - Boni is “really slow”
  - “It’s hard for me not to just do it for him”

## A Contradictory Voice: Viola’s Perspective



- Mrs. W really cares about Boni
- In Sudan, teachers ignore children who are struggling

## Insights

- Marginalization is not a unitary construct
- Marginalization may be an unintended result of current educational realities
- Positionality and perspective play an important role in identifying marginality
- Power and agency also factor into marginalization

## Questions

- Is marginality an absolute? What do the complex stories/images presented here suggest about the construct of marginalization?
- What is the role of context in marginalization? Is a marginalized child always marginalized in the same context?
- Are all children with given characteristics at equal risk of being marginalized?
- Do we marginalize children simply by assuming that they are at risk of being marginalized?
- Does marginality always imply negative consequences? Are there some types of marginalization that may empower or afford positive outcomes?
- What is the role of perspective in determining marginality? Given this role, what are the implications for educational researchers?
- How do current educational realities in the U.S. (e.g., NCLB) increase or decrease marginalization of children in schools?