

**Marginality Within Literacy Classrooms:
Young Sudanese Refugee Children**

Working Paper

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Boni and the other first-graders in his class filed across the hall to the other first grade teacher for their science lesson on movement. Mrs. J settled the children on the floor and instructed them to look around the room for moving objects. “Who found something that was moving?” she asked. Boni gave a big, excited gasp, raised his arm in the air, and began frantically waving it around. Mrs. J called on a girl, who said that the snowflake mobiles that hung from the ceiling had moved. Boni turned around and said to her, “I was going to SAY that!” Mrs. J then called on Boni, who pointed at a clothespin that also hung on a string from the ceiling. Mrs. J said to him, “Tell me what it is. You have to use your words.” Boni just sat there and looked at the clothespin. Finally, he said, “That thing.” Mrs. J said, “What is it?” Boni again sat in silence, and the teacher called on another child, who named it as a clothespin. Mrs. J then said to Boni that she hadn’t seen it move.

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*Ms. S gathered Samuel and his fellow kindergarteners on the rug in front of the blackboard for the daily group routine of writing the morning message. Ms. S began to write the day’s date, asking children in the class to help her sound out the spelling of various words. The children had already supplied the F and the R in “Friday”, and Samuel raised his hand to offer a suggestion. Ms. S asked Samuel what letter should come next. She said the word slowly. Samuel thought and then suggested a D. Ms. S wrote this down, leaving a space for the I. She explained that there was another letter before the D. Again, she slowly enunciated, “Friiiiiiday,” and waited while Samuel continued to think. Some of the other children—eager to participate in the activity—blurted out the I, which Ms. S added to the word before turning back to Samuel. She asked him, “Do you know how to spell ‘day’?” Samuel offered, “Y?” Ms. S kept repeating the word slowly. She paused a long time. Ms. S waited and then told Samuel that she could tell that*

*he was thinking really hard. She asked another child to help Samuel, and the class completed spelling “Friday” together.*

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A Tale of Two Brothers

Boni and Samuel are the two oldest children in a family of southern Sudanese refugees living in Lansing, Michigan. The brothers share many of the same characteristics: The boys’ dark chocolate skin reflects their heritage as black African Christians from the far southern regions of Sudan. Their first language is a dialect of Arabic local to the Juba region of southern Sudan, although both are very competent English-speakers as well. Despite these similarities, Boni and Samuel could not be more different.

Boni

Boni, the oldest, is a friendly, charming, energetic, happy-go-lucky boy. Boni has a keen interest in his African heritage; he enjoys listening and dancing to music from Africa, and he particularly enjoys watching the African music videos and soap operas that his parents buy. Boni also prefers to speak Arabic at home, much to his parents’ dismay. Academically, however, Boni struggles. Boni generally enjoys going to school, but he is not a fan of homework, and he particularly abhors spelling tests. Spending time with books typically is not on Boni’s list of fun things to do, either. But, he is always eager to please, and he genuinely wants to do well on assigned schoolwork, even when it is clearly beyond his capabilities. At the end of his kindergarten year, Boni’s teacher recommended him for retention. Boni’s parents felt that this was inappropriate for Boni at that time, and they refused to consent to his retention. In first grade, Boni fell further and further behind, particularly in literacy achievement. He received extra instruction with a reading specialist through Title 1, but this was not enough for Boni. At

the end of his first grade year, Boni was again recommended for retention. However, the local school district has a school devoted to intensive literacy and math instruction for primary-grades children who were struggling, and Boni was accepted into this program. Despite the intensive instruction at this new school, Boni continues to struggle; it is becoming increasingly apparent that Boni likely has a learning disability.

Samuel

Samuel is a quiet, introverted child. While Boni likes to be in the thick of things, Samuel prefers to quietly observe, usually sucking on two or three of his fingers. Samuel firmly believes in rules and order—he easily grows frustrated with children who misbehave in school, and he gets frustrated with his younger brother for messing up their shared bedroom. Unlike Boni, Samuel displays much more ambivalent feelings about his Sudanese identity. He regularly expresses distaste for traditional Sudanese foods, he more frequently speaks English at home than Boni does, and he became very distressed when Viola required him to wear a traditional African shirt to a Sudanese cultural celebration. Samuel prefers to engage in quiet, solitary activities, in contrast with Boni, who clearly enjoys socializing. Samuel loves to draw, and he often sits with crayons and paper, happily humming to himself and drawing a picture of Superman or some other superhero, while people around him engage in lively conversations. Samuel loves books and reading—he eagerly carried off the books that I sometimes brought during my visits into a corner of the room, where I would hear him pretend-reading quietly to himself. School is relatively easy for Samuel. Samuel's academic achievement is right on track; in fact, he is a better reader than many of his native English-speaking peers, and he was one of the most prolific writers in his kindergarten class. Samuel enjoys setting challenges for himself, and he frequently assigns himself academic tasks to perform at home. Even before he started

kindergarten, Samuel asked me to teach him to write the ABCs and numbers, and he regularly sprawled out on the kitchen floor to practice writing.

Viola and Isbon

Boni and Samuel's parents both had opportunities to become highly educated in Africa—an unusual accomplishment in a country where parents often cannot afford to send their children to school. The boys' mother, Viola, is the daughter of the former Sudanese Minister of Justice, and she was raised with an uncommon degree of privilege for a Christian from a black African ethnic group in southern Sudan. Viola attended a well-regarded high school and then earned a law degree at a university in Egypt. The boys' father, Isbon, completed high school and planned to attend a university in Lebanon, but financial difficulties related to his experience as a refugee prevented him from matriculating. As a result of their own familial and educational experiences, Viola and Isbon are raising their children in a home environment that highly values education.

The parents, however, face challenges in the U.S. that impact their ability to support their children's education. Viola and Isbon both speak English, although to different degrees of fluency, and neither feels confident enough in his or her abilities to fully support their children's learning. Neither parent's educational credentials "count" in the U.S. Despite the fact that Isbon holds a high-school diploma, he still needs to complete a GED program in the U.S. in order to qualify for certain jobs. Similarly, Viola holds a professional college degree, but again, her certification in law does not transfer to this country. As a result, both parents have labored in low-wage jobs in Michigan—Isbon works in the housekeeping department at a local hospital, and Viola has worked at several jobs, including cooking at a fast-food chicken restaurant, housekeeping at a hotel, and now manufacturing electronic door systems for an auto-parts supplier. Currently, both parents work the night shift. Viola leaves home at 2 p.m. for her job,

and she typically does not return until about 3 a.m. Although she is only supposed to work 4 days a week, her supervisor often calls her to work overtime on the weekends; Viola feels that she cannot refuse, because she is worried that she will lose her job if she does not come in for the extra hours. Before beginning this job last spring, Viola closely supervised the boys' homework and even created extra practice activities for Boni. Due to her work schedule, however, Viola has not been able to help her children with their schoolwork. Isbon, too, usually needs to be at his job between 11 and 12 p.m., although his work schedule is much more predictable than Viola's. Because of his schedule and the need to care for two other younger sons when Viola is at work, the only chance Isbon has to sleep is in the afternoon when Boni and Samuel return from school. Isbon, too, expresses his frustration that his job prevents him from providing extra help to his sons, and he worries that the boys end up spending too much time in front of the television.

Given this context that surrounds Boni and Samuel, the vignettes presented at the beginning of this paper offer glimpses into the ways in which these refugee children were marginalized (or not) in their Michigan classrooms. Mrs. J's insistence that Boni "use his words", for example, takes on a different meaning when we know that Boni is not a native speaker of English—he does not actually *have* the English word for "clothespin". In this case, Mrs. J not only marginalized Boni by the fact that he did not know a particular vocabulary word, but when he came up with an alternate answer to the already-taken snowflake mobile in order to participate in the group activity, the teacher rejected the suggestion that he offered. Instead of grasping a brief "teachable moment" and helping Boni learn a new vocabulary word, the teacher instead chose to discount Boni's participation. In contrast, Ms. S's scaffolding of the spelling activity—her repetitions of the word and elongations of the phonemes—and her acknowledgement that Samuel was thinking hard, all illustrate a classroom that was structured to

support all children's language and literacy development, including those who may speak other languages at home.

Marginalization

These vignettes, along with others that I will present in this paper, help to illustrate the ways in which American classrooms have the potential to marginalize young refugee children. Focusing on children from cultural groups that are outside of the mainstream serves to highlight such issues of power in literacy learning contexts. The social practice frame of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Street, 1995, 2001) recognizes power as an integral aspect of both language and literacy use. Focusing on issues of power and marginality are crucial, because American schools tend to reflect the dominant culture, and they are largely staffed by White, middle-class women. Refugee families typically already have encountered many marginalizing experiences before their children enter U.S. schools. Richmond (2002) suggests that refugees are now the new "underclass", which distinguishes them from more fortunate immigrants. Refugees have been forced to flee their native countries for a variety of reasons; they may seek refuge from oppressive political or economic systems; from religious, ethnic, or political persecution; from warfare; or from genocide (Richmond, 2002; U.S. Committee for Refugees, 2004). When refugee families arrive in the U.S., they face many challenges that include: Adjusting to a new culture and way of life; speaking or learning to speak a language in which they have minimal (if any) proficiency; learning to read and/or write in a new language, which also may involve learning a different alphabetic or orthographic system; or simply becoming literate in *any* language for the first time (Pryor, 2001; Tharp, 1989). These challenges have important implications for U.S. schools, which must absorb refugee students regardless of their experiences and abilities. Teachers may

not understand the experiences or cultural context of their students, and they may judge these already potentially-marginalized children by standards from their own background and deem them to be lacking (Tabachnik & Bloch, 1995). Bourdieu (1991) suggests that when schools and other formal institutions dismiss the discourses and practices of marginalized groups they enact a form of symbolic violence. Such symbolic violence is especially relevant to groups such as refugees, who are often marginalized by being (often wrongly) characterized as uneducated and illiterate.

Marginalization, however, is not a clearly defined construct. Scholars often discuss marginality and marginalization as though they were absolute, using “marginalization” and “marginalized” as blanket terms that apply to entire communities or populations. Such uses can imply that these communities (and the individuals that inhabit them) are either marginalized or they aren’t, without much consideration of the middle ground. Yet, postmodern and post-structural theories remind us that broad constructions such as these blind us to difference, specificity, and the importance of local context (Canagarajah, 1999). The stories that I share in this paper will help to complicate such constructions of “marginality” and “marginalization” by presenting specific data from my research with Boni and Samuel and their family. As the vignettes at the beginning of the paper show, two children from the very same social and cultural milieu—brothers who might be labeled as being at-risk for marginalization due to their skin color, their first language, and their status as refugees in low-income families—may have very different experiences with marginalization in the same U.S. school. In addition, the stories that I will share also highlight the murkiness of marginality by illustrating the fluctuating and complex nature of marginalization in these classrooms, and by showing the importance of perspective when considering marginality.

Studying Sudanese Refugee Families

The data presented in this paper represent one small slice of a much larger ethnographic study of literacy practices among Sudanese refugee families with young children. Three Michigan refugee families originally from southern Sudan participated in this study, although I only focus on Boni and Samuel's family in this paper. I used ethnographic methods to collect the data for this study, including participant observation, formal and informal interviewing, and collection of literacy artifacts. My observations occurred in the home and community settings over a period of 18 months from February, 2005 to July, 2006. I also observed in the boys' classrooms during the 2005-2006 school year, when Boni was in first grade and Samuel was in kindergarten. Data analysis for this study involved analyzing emerging patterns through coding, content and theme analyses, and discourse analysis of interactions and interview transcripts.

As an ethnographer, my position within the community has been an important part of the research process. I have been involved in the Sudanese community in Lansing for the past 4 ½ years. I first entered the community as a tutor for orphaned Sudanese refugee youth (the so-called Lost Boys), and I also have been a member of the board of the Southern Sudan Rescue and Relief Association (SSRRA) for nearly three years. Through these roles, I also have become an unofficial mentor within the Sudanese community. I have continued to volunteer my services as a tutor and mentor within the southern Sudanese community throughout this study, offering homework help to the children in the study families and acting as a culture broker and community liaison to the families and the larger community.

Marginalization: Stories and Perspectives

In my observations of Boni and Samuel in their classroom contexts, in the interviews and conversations that I engaged in with their parents and teachers, and in some of the written

artifacts that I gathered, it became clear to me that a variety of forms of marginalization or inclusion occurred in Boni and Samuel's school experiences. These experiences occurred in two broad contexts—in the teachers' personal views of and the feedback they offered to each child, and in the classroom activities that surrounded the boys. It is interesting to note that, of all of the instances of marginalization that I coded in my fieldnotes from all four of the classrooms that I visited (including the two girls in the study who are not discussed in this paper), all but two of the 20 instances of clear marginalization occurred around Boni. In the cases of both Boni and Samuel, the ways in which their teachers would talk about the boys and the types of feedback that the children received indicated the extent to which each boy experienced marginalization in his classroom.

Boni's Kindergarten Experiences

In Boni's case, much of the marginalization I noted in his kindergarten context occurred in the form of negative feedback from his teacher.¹ This negative feedback began occurring early in Boni's school life. During my very first visit with the family in February, 2005, Viola explained that Boni

“has trouble” in kindergarten. He's “always behind” the other kids. “He's smart,” she said, “but . . .” Viola thinks that his being behind is attributable to only having had one year of Head Start, and not going to an after school program for refugees. She said that after 2 months of kindergarten, Boni couldn't count well, and he didn't know his letters well, according to the teacher [Fieldnotes, 2/16/05].

Boni's kindergarten teacher often sent home Boni's papers that she had corrected using a thick marker:

¹ Due to the fact that I did not yet have permission to conduct research in the local school district, I was not able to observe Boni in his kindergarten class. The data on Boni's kindergarten experiences rely on written feedback sent home by the teacher and on reports from Viola.

The teacher had made corrections of Boni's work in red marker. The corrections were all of the showing-the-correct-way-to-write-the-letter type. In fact, Boni had written the correct words in each blank, but it appeared that he hadn't formed the letters to the teacher's satisfaction. For example, she added a bit extra to the tip of an "f", and she wrote over a "t", where Boni had crossed the "t" below the middle line. Boni had made all the correct letters, but some of them were a bit too large or too small, or they were not written very neatly [Fieldnotes, 3/21/05].

At the end of March during his kindergarten year, Boni brought home a variety of end-of-quarter literacy assessments that he had done at school. Figure 1 illustrates Boni's work at writing out the alphabet, as well as his teacher's comment: "Needs extra help at home forming letters correctly!!" Again, Boni's writing is quite clear—it is obvious that he knew all of the letters of the alphabet. Each letter is clearly distinguishable, although some of the letters do not fully utilize the lined area. In this case, it appears that the ways in which Boni formed these letters was largely a matter of fine-motor control, rather than not knowing the correct way to form the letters.

Place Figure 1 about here.

Because I was not able to interview Boni's kindergarten teacher, I can only speculate about her intentions in providing the feedback that she gave for this assessment. It is possible that she wrote over Boni's letters simply to draw his attention to the nuances of certain letter shapes. However, her written comment, "Needs extra help at home forming letters correctly!!" suggests otherwise. This comment clearly suggests a deficit; it implies that Boni does not know

how to form the letters correctly, and it implies that he either is not already practicing writing at home or else that he is practicing incorrectly. When I saw Boni's teacher's comment, I was momentarily taken aback—I believed that his letter formation was actually quite good for a kindergartner. Indeed, Boni's first grade teacher later confirmed my belief. When Viola and I visited with Mrs. W for Parents' Night in September of Boni's first grade year, she commented, "He has the best printing in our class!"

Mrs. W's Perspective

Boni attended a new school for first grade, because the school he had attended for kindergarten had been shut down, due to declining enrollment and budget constraints. Mrs. W had been teaching in the district for 23 years, and she had been teaching first grade for all but two of those years. In addition to being an extremely experienced first grade teacher, Mrs. W was also very familiar with Sudanese refugees; she and her husband had been foster parents for three Sudanese "Lost Boys", who had lived with her family for four years. Mrs. W therefore understood many of the difficulties that refugees faced in Michigan, and she also saw first hand some of the marginalization that these African refugees experienced. For example, she told me about a time when she was called to the high school:

One of the specialists had to take my class, and I go to [the] High School, and all the police cars are there...And my younger one had gotten in a fight. Someone had called him a black monkey...The problem was—you know, they couldn't stop him. They were trying to stop him and he had this rage...We paid for him to go to private counseling, which did help him...He has the post-traumatic stress disorder [Interview, 6/1/06].

Mrs. W liked Boni a great deal; he repeatedly told Viola and me that he was a "lovely little boy"; however, she also believed that Boni was trailing far behind his other classmates,

particularly in terms of literacy development. When Viola and I attended parent-teacher conferences in November, Mrs. W reiterated, “He’s a lovely little boy, and he’s very dear to me and dear to his classmates, but I’ve told you that before.” She described Boni’s neatness and organizational skills, and she talked about how hard he tried in class. However, Mrs. W also made it quite clear that she thought Boni should not be in first grade:

I think he would have been better in kindergarten this year, repeating kindergarten. I think that would have been a better choice for him. Um, I don’t know that he was ready for first grade when he came... Things are going to get a lot harder soon, and I just worry about him getting lost. And we have a lot of, um, very difficult tests that we have to give the children, and I have to start getting the rest of the class ready, and I’m really torn. It’s really hard for me to keep Boni going, and I can’t hold my class back just for him

[Fieldnotes, 11/9/05].

Mrs. W’s comments clearly place Boni on the margins of his first-grade classroom. Not only does Mrs. W suggest that Boni should be in kindergarten instead of her classroom, but she also juxtaposes Boni with “the rest of the class”. As a former teacher and a current educational researcher and teacher-educator, my own inner reaction to Mrs. W’s comments was strong. I believed that a good teacher should be able to differentiate her instruction enough to meet Boni’s needs while simultaneously preparing the class for standardized tests, rather than “holding the class back just for him.” I also wondered if Mrs. W would have made the same comment if Viola were a white, middle-class, native English-speaking parent.

Observational Perspectives

Although Mrs. W believed that Boni should not be in first grade, she nevertheless worked hard to support him in her class. However, some of Mrs. W’s pedagogical decisions

inadvertently reinforced Boni's position on the margins of first-grade activity. For example, in October, Mrs. W's class was working on sending thank-you letters to someone who had visited the class. The children had already written out drafts of their letters, and Mrs. W had made corrections on their drafts. Nearly all of the children needed to make the corrections and recopy their letters, and during the pre-writing mini-lesson in front of the whole class, Mrs. W asked two of the girls with "perfect" letters to help Boni and another struggling writer when it was time to do writing center:

Boni began to recopy the letter right away. K kept taking the pencil out of his hand as he wrote, erasing letters. She erased letters that were correct and told Boni to write them more neatly. (I thought this was pretty ironic, since the teacher keeps saying that Boni has the neatest printing in the class!)...K kept yanking the pencil out of his hand as he tried to write. She erased an entire word. She then disappeared to tell Mrs. W that Boni was doing a good job. I overheard Mrs. W say, "Well, Boni always does a good job." K returned and told Boni, "Now write 'my name'—that is SO sloppy." She began to erase what he had written [Fieldnotes, 10/29/05].

After this, K reminded Boni to put spaces between the words, and she suggested that he use an eraser as a marker to determine how much space to leave, which Boni did. During the rest of the interaction, Boni and K became increasingly frustrated with each other; K eventually wandered off, and Boni actually was able to get more work done in her absence. However, because he had to keep re-writing the words that K erased, Boni was not able to finish recopying his letter in the time left before the next center rotation.

In this case, Mrs. W inadvertently marginalizes Boni when she publicly identifies him as a child who is in need of extra help. She also juxtaposes Boni with K and the other girl who

composed “perfect” letters on their first try. Mrs. W’s use of peer tutors certainly reflects her beliefs that children need to socialize as they learn and that students can be good resources for each other, and it may be a good supportive management strategy in a classroom with such a large number of children. However, K’s attempts at “helping” Boni were misguided at best. Her comments about Boni’s handwriting communicated that she has clearly picked up on the fact that he is not a good writer. In addition, K’s insistence on erasing Boni’s work for him ensured that he would remain on the margins of this writing activity—not only was Boni’s writing obviously not good enough for her, but Boni was not able to complete the assignment during the writing center time, and he had to miss another activity in order to complete the letter.

Like many struggling children, Boni was also marked as marginal in the ways in which he was pulled out of the class for extra help. Boni qualified for and received extra help with the school’s Title 1 reading specialist; he met with her four times a week for additional reading instruction. Boni’s school also employed several paraprofessional classroom aides, and Boni and other struggling learners frequently worked one-on-one or in small groups with Mrs. W’s aide or with “Grandma”, a volunteer who helped out in the classroom on a regular basis. Mrs. W’s aide typically removed the children from the classroom and worked with them at a small table that was down the hall, outside Samuel’s kindergarten classroom. I always followed Boni and observed him in these special groups. In January, I was able to have a short conversation with the aide, whom I had seen several times, but whom I knew nothing about at that point:

The aide turned to me and said that this was the lowest group. She said that she only teaches math this year. I asked if she was certified to teach special ed, and she said that she’s just a paraprofessional; she said she’d only taken the classes that she needed to take to be qualified to do this...She said that [Boni] is really slow, and that he needs to repeat

things a lot and that he often doesn't remember how to do it the next time. She said that he often waits for her to do the work for him, and she said it's hard for her to not just do it for him [Fieldnotes, 1/23/06].

The use of such paraprofessional aides to help struggling children naturally presents a dilemma: On the one hand, these classroom aides can provide more personal attention for children who need extra help when the classroom teacher is not available. On the other hand, however, the children who need the most help and the best instruction are being taught by the people who are least qualified to provide it. In addition, pulling these children out of the classroom for extra help again marks them as marginal by being labeled as "slow". The children's physical separation from Mrs. W's classroom also emphasizes their marginality in relation to the rest of the first graders—not to mention the fact that the children receive extra help outside the kindergarten classrooms, which only emphasizes the belief that these children do not belong in the first grade classroom.

Different Perspectives

Although Boni often was inadvertently marginalized in his classroom, these events typically were the result of Mrs. W's attempts to scaffold and support his learning and participation in her class. In fact, as the year progressed, Mrs. W increasingly became an advocate for Boni. At the spring parent-teacher conference, Mrs. W again expressed her admiration for Boni's personal qualities, despite his obvious academic struggles. For example, Boni had made Mrs. W laugh after a particularly stressful tornado drill, and he had also caught and turned in the child who had been stealing things in the classroom. However, Mrs. W reiterated again that Boni was far behind his classmates:

You know, his report card basically says that he's having trouble in reading and that he's still reading here [pointing to emergent literacy scale]. One of his little friends that was reading here with him just qualified today for special ed, so I mean—you know, he's still behind, and so I'm worried. We're doing the best we can. He goes to the reading teacher every day. Um, and we're working with him every day. Um, but it's still for some reason, it just isn't clicking, and I don't know why, because I know it is for Samuel. I hear he's doing real well [Fieldnotes, 3/29/06].

In contrast with Mrs. W's first conference with Viola, Mrs. W's position toward Boni appeared to have changed. She still emphasized that Boni was having trouble in school, but she no longer emphasized his place on the margins of the classroom. Instead, Mrs. W appeared increasingly to be acting as an advocate for Boni. When she heard that he qualified for the intensive literacy and math school, Mrs. W strongly recommended that Boni go to that program. She believed that this would be the best solution for Boni, not only because the school could give him more individualized and focused instruction, but because he would not have to be retained; the family could therefore avoid the difficulty of having Boni and Samuel in the same grade. Mrs. W also talked with Viola about how she and Isbon could advocate for Boni at the new school in terms of his alarmingly slow literacy development:

I don't know if it's maturity, if it's language, or if there is something else going on in the way he sees the word or the way he hears the word that is making him read like—you know, have trouble. So, I was saying, next year if he goes to second grade, if he goes to [the other school], if at January he's still not reading, if he is not making progress up this scale, then I would ask to have him tested. And they're going to tell you, "Oh, no, no, he's a second language child." And you insist, because I think he has enough language

that he should be reading better than this. There's some reason why he's not reading [Fieldnotes 3/29/06].

A few days after this conference, Viola and I went to visit the school that Mrs. W had recommended for Boni:

Viola told me that she was very happy with Boni's teacher. She said she was very pleased that Mrs. W gives Boni so much attention, that she cares so much about him, even though he's struggling in school. Viola told me that in the Sudan, teachers ignore children who are struggling; she said that they only want to talk to the children who are doing well [Fieldnotes, 3/31/06].

Viola's comments surprised me; at this point in the school year, I was still struggling with the ways in which I believed Boni was being marginalized in his classroom. I worried that Boni was being pushed to the margins of his classroom because of his low academic achievement, particularly his struggle with literacy. However, Viola's comments to me suggested that marginality may be in the eye of the beholder—what appeared to be marginalization from my perspective could be perceived as extra support and inclusion given Viola's experiences with education in Sudan.

Samuel's Experiences

Samuel's school experience could not have been more different from Boni's experiences. Samuel's teacher, Ms. S, was a young Latina woman who was in her first year of teaching her own class; she had graduated from Michigan State University's teacher education program a couple of years before, and she had worked as a long-term substitute until getting the job in Samuel's class. The feedback that Samuel, his parents, and I all received from Ms. S was that Samuel was a well-behaved little boy who was thriving academically in his kindergarten

classroom. In an interview I conducted with Ms. S at the end of the year, she expressed her positive regard for Samuel and his family:

It seems like he really does come from a good family that stresses good values and whatnot. And I can—a lot of times students will do something, and he'll give them an explanation as to, you know, what they're doing that could be inappropriate and whatnot. He'll give an explanation as to that. In terms of family values and whatnot, he brings that here [Interview, 5/24/06].

In her parent-teacher conferences with Viola and me in November and March, and in interviews with me in February and May, Ms. S repeatedly said that she had no concerns about Samuel's academic development. In November, she commented, "Samuel's really—he carries his weight in the class"; in March, she noted, "He's a writer—he can write!", and in May, she said, "I think he's pretty much above most of them in their writing." However, Ms. S often commented that Samuel was shy. During the November parent-teacher conference, for example, Ms. S had noted this as a concern on Samuel's report card. She explained to Viola:

Sometimes he is—I just put shy and hesitant. He can usually express what he wants to say to me, but now and then it's kind of like pulling for it with him. And I underlined volume, 'cause he tends to be quiet about his speech and whatnot [Fieldnotes, 11/9/05].

Before he entered kindergarten and early in the academic year, I had worried that Samuel might be judged as "slow", due to his quiet, reserved nature. Samuel often took a long time to respond to questions, and when he did respond, his answers typically were very short. Knowing Samuel as I did, I was aware that his response style was not at all indicative of his cognitive abilities, but rather reflected Samuel's quiet, introspective personality.

Happily, Ms. S also realized this about Samuel; she described him to me as a “silent thinker”, in contrast with most of the other children in her class. In an interview I conducted with her in February, she told me that she sometimes got caught off guard by Samuel when she was working with him in his reading group. She said, “I mean, I’ll think, ‘You’re not looking at the card, you’re not looking at me—are you distracted by the students?’ But, I’ve realized he’s just taking that time to do it in his head”. Ms. S’s style of interacting with the children allowed her to learn about the children, and she also provided a great deal of “wait time” to allow the children to display their thinking. For example, in January, I observed when her class was engaged in math centers. In one center, Samuel was working on sorting out different types of geometric shapes, and Ms. S was monitoring his group:

Samuel made a comment about a hexagon. Ms. S asked, “How do you know ‘hexagon’?”

Samuel replied, “‘Cause my mom told me about it.” Ms. S asked him if Boni uses

hexagons, but Samuel said that he didn’t. When Ms. S got up to leave a minute or two

later, she pointed to the chain of hexagons that Samuel had made and asked what shape

that was. He paused for a very, very long time. Ms. S reminded him that he had said the

word just then, and he finally said it was a hexagon. When Ms. S asked him about the

rectangle, he again paused for a long time before answering [Fieldnotes, 1/26/06].

Although Ms. S understood that Samuel’s silence indicated deep thought rather than a lack of understanding, she still believed that it was important for him to come out of his shell, so to speak. At his March parent-teacher conference, she commented, “He is opening up a lot and becoming more talkative with the kids and having more fun. I see him laughing more and having a good time, which is good!” Ms. S believed—and probably rightly so—that this was evidence that Samuel was becoming more comfortable in the classroom. Yet, her clear belief that it was

better for Samuel to be less shy implies that there is something wrong with introverted personality styles. While this is not exactly evidence of marginalization for Samuel—at least not the same sort of marginalization that I observed in Boni’s classroom—there is still an implication that Samuel’s shyness was not quite “normal” and that his becoming more talkative was somehow a better state of being in the classroom.

In fact, Samuel often separated himself from others in the classroom—by choice. He had good friends in the class, but Samuel often preferred to work by himself. At home, he often expressed his frustration with kids who misbehaved, and at school, he readily pointed out to me which children listened and which did not. In centers, Samuel often appeared to be on the periphery of the circle of children in his group. For example, I observed him one day during the library center:

Samuel returned to the other bookshelf and browsed through those books again, pulling several down from the shelf and then putting them back...The other three children in the group constantly chatted as they browsed through the books, but Samuel said almost nothing. Samuel sat apart from the other three and worked by himself...Samuel then opened up the book *Jamaica’s Find* and began looking through the pictures. The other kids in the group began reciting the ABCs. Samuel corrected them in the middle, reciting a few letters before going back to his looking at the pictures [11/4/05].

From the outside, an observer might consider that Samuel is marginalized because he is clearly not a part of the group in the same way that the other children are. However, this vignette suggests that not all incidents of marginality must necessarily have a negative connotation. Samuel exists on the margins of the library center group, not because he is pushed there by the teacher or by the other children in the group, but because he chooses to position himself there.

This is a more comfortable position for the introverted Samuel, where he can more easily free himself from the distractions of the other children, he can more deeply explore books that he finds interesting, and he can choose when and how to enter the group's conversations and activities.

Insights and Implications

Thinking about Marginality

Boni's and Samuel's school experiences clearly illustrate the complexity of the construct of marginality in U.S. classrooms. Both boys experienced marginalization to some extent in their classrooms, yet the difference in the way that this marginalization occurred illustrates the fact that marginality is not a unitary construct. Boni's case is particularly illustrative of the complexity of marginality, especially as it was enacted in his first grade classroom. Boni's experiences suggest that marginalization is not a cut-and-dried construct; on the one hand, Boni was singled out and separated because of his low academic achievement, but on the other hand, his teacher did her best to support his learning and to advocate for him, especially as the end of the year drew near. Some of the vignettes about Boni illustrate clear marginalization—for example, when Mrs. J insisted that Boni use words that he did not actually know. In other episodes, however, the marginalization is less clear. For example, Mrs. W intended to support Boni by asking a more-advanced peer to help him with his writing, but K's "help" actually had the opposite effect.

The stories surrounding Boni's and Samuel's school experiences also highlight the importance of positionality and agency when considering whether a child is marginalized or not in school. This issue of positionality certainly involves considering *who* has initiated a potentially marginalizing event. In Boni's case, marginalization was enacted upon him by others,

particularly those in positions of power—by his teachers, by other adults in the school, and by the system itself. Boni's experiences fit well with a traditional construction of marginalization—being pushed to the periphery or excluded from the center or from full participation by others. In addition, Boni's experiences appear to illustrate the typical pattern of marginalization and low academic achievement. On the surface, at least, Boni's perceived low abilities in literacy lead to marginalization within his classroom which likely will lead to continued poor school performance. In Samuel's case, in contrast, any marginalization that occurred was imposed by Samuel himself when he chose to separate himself from his peers. Samuel's experiences fit less well with the traditional definition of marginalization, but it may be useful to more deeply explore the implications of such self-imposed marginality. Unlike Boni, Samuel's self-imposed position at times on the periphery of group activity in his class likely emerged from his introspective nature and his engagement with school and with learning. In fact, separating himself may actually have been an effective strategy for Samuel, one that ensured strong academic performance.

The issue of positionality also relates to how others perceive potentially marginalizing events. Viola's and my opposite reactions to Mrs. W's treatment of Boni clearly illustrate this point. I, as a white, middle-class educational researcher, viewed some of Mrs. W's decisions and comments as marginalizing for Boni. Viola, however, felt quite the opposite: As a parent who had experienced both the educational system in Sudan and many marginalizing experiences as a refugee coming the U.S., Viola believed that Boni was being fully included at school and she appreciated Mrs. W's efforts to advocate for Boni. Viola explained that if Boni were attending school in Sudan, he likely would have been totally rejected by his teacher because he was a slow learner, and she was delighted that this was not happening in Michigan.

As a result, the educational community would do well to explore more questions surrounding marginality:

- Is marginality an absolute? What do the 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?

Implications for Schools

The stories that I have shared in this paper have several implications for U.S. classrooms. Although the data that I share clearly represent the specific case of Sudanese refugee children who speak another language at home, the implications certainly do not apply only to them.

First, contrasting vignettes such as the ones I presented at the beginning of this paper suggest that we still have a long way to go in thinking about marginalization and inclusion in relation to English language learners in U.S. classrooms. These vignettes serve as a reminder that even children who are largely competent in English, although they speak another language at

home, still may need considerable support for English language development in schools. The U.S. educational system is still grappling with the challenges and constraints of educating children who speak languages other than English at home. Much of the attention regarding these language issues focuses on Spanish-speaking children, yet even small cities like Lansing are seeing booming populations of refugees and immigrants from around the world, and mid-Michigan school districts must teach children who represent over 40 different native languages in their classrooms. For example, U.S. schools are suddenly absorbing African refugees from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and Liberia, and many school districts are at a loss as to how to best educate these children, who arrive with different levels of experience with formal education and with different competencies in English.

As these populations increase, many schools attempt to deal with limited funding and crowded classrooms by utilizing paraprofessionals and classroom volunteers. While providing such classroom aides may be an understandable response to such challenges, the unfortunate reality is that teachers often divert struggling learners to these aides, who are not as well-qualified to help these children as are the teachers themselves. Pulling struggling learners out of the classroom also presents another dilemma. On the one hand, these pull-outs (whether by paraprofessionals or by educational specialists) offer children the opportunity to get more individual and possibly more specialized instruction. On the other hand, these children may miss out on important content as they focus on basic skills, and their physical separation from the rest of the class also clearly marks these children as “other”.

Teachers such as Mrs. W and Ms. S face huge challenges in being able to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms: Large class sizes with a broad range of academic, social, and emotional needs; not enough well-trained adults to provide quality differentiated instruction to

meet the needs of these students; and increasing pressure for teachers to prepare students to perform well on standardized tests. Given these constraints, Mrs. W's concern about Boni and her desire to not hold the rest of the class back just for him is understandable. Given these constraints, I believe that Mrs. W supported Boni to the best of her ability. Although Boni was sometimes placed on the margins of first grade classroom life, I believe that these instances actually were kept to a minimum, and—given my experiences in other classrooms in the same district—I believe that Boni would have been far more marginalized in another teacher's classroom or in a different school. Yet, these realities suggest that educational researchers and practitioners must continue to think about how we incorporate children like Boni and Samuel into our classrooms.

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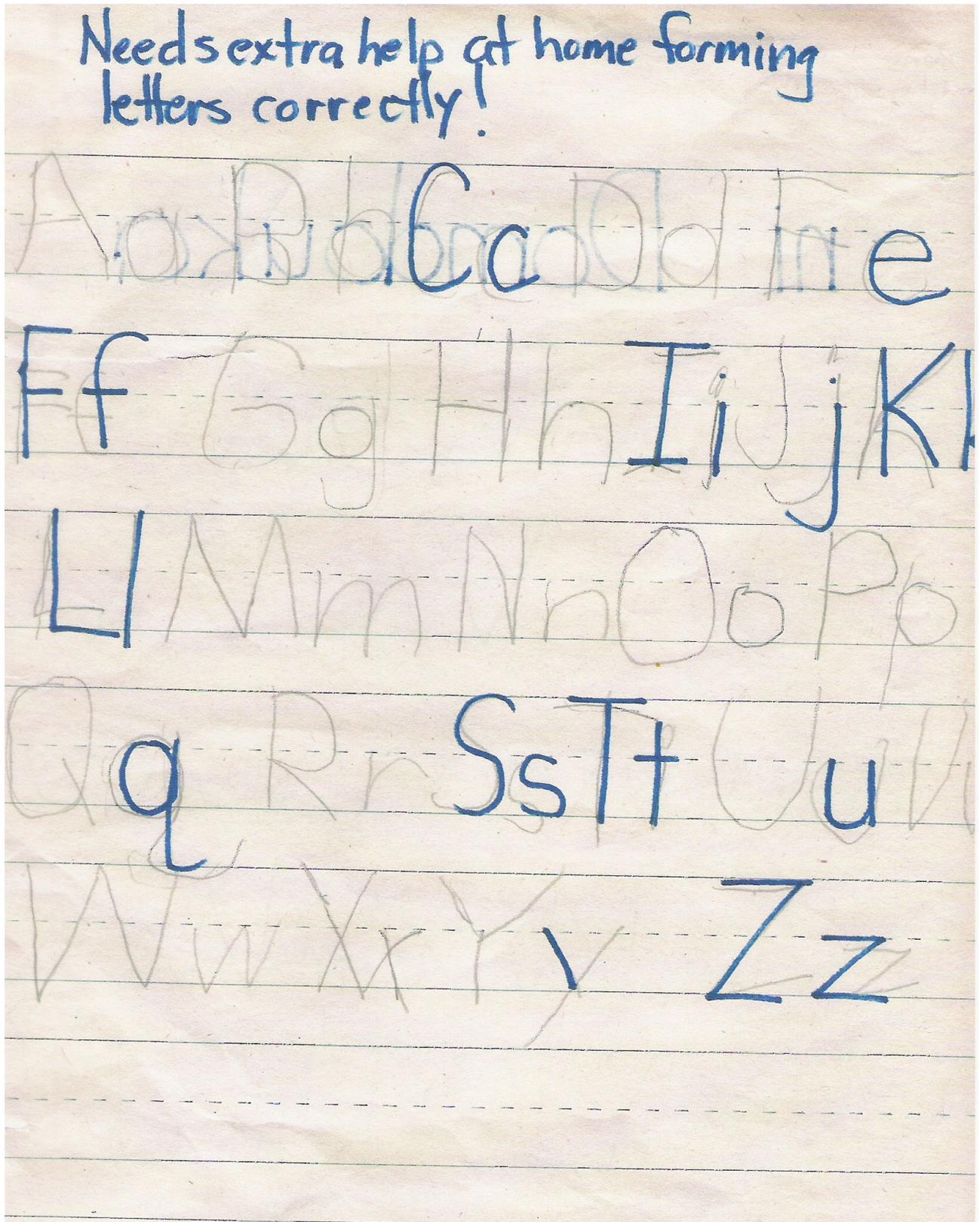


Figure 1. Teacher feedback about Boni's kindergarten alphabet-writing assessment.