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Narratives of Race, Gender, and Power in Family Literacy Classrooms for Refugee Women With Interrupted Formal Schooling

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Abstract

In this paper, we seek to open up, for public reflection, some questions we have encountered surrounding race, gender, and power in classrooms for adults learning additional languages in contexts of migration. These learners are emergent readers, who are women, who have experienced interruptions in school-based learning. Through three reflective narratives of teaching in U.S.-based adult English family literacy classrooms for students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), we hope to lay open some of our current questions and dilemmas, as well as inspire broader discussions surrounding these critical issues in SIFE teaching and learning contexts.

Introduction

As colleagues and friends teaching and researching in English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) family literacy programs for refugee women (who were also students with interrupted formal education [SIFE]) during the 2014-2015 U.S. school year, our conversations pivoted around common topics: effective teaching methods and curricula, learner struggles, and educational policies that impact learners and programs, amongst others. We also wondered about the ways we, as White women born in the U.S., can support SIFE women of color in their ongoing identity negotiations as language learners who may be experiencing gender and race in new ways in the U.S. (Bigelow, 2010; Gordon, 2004, 2009; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Norton, 2012). We frequently came away from our conversations with more questions than answers.

The critical incidents we share in the narratives below reflect some of our ongoing uncertainties. Our narratives also attempt to “see” our students and ourselves more holistically, and as embedded within historical and social contexts. As Delpit (1995) writes, “When we teach across the boundaries of race, class, and gender—indeed when we teach at all—we must recognize and overcome the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other” (p. 134). We extend Delpit’s list of barriers to minimally include: age, ability/ies, nationality/ies, language(s), levels and types of prior education, and political statuses (e.g., citizen, refugee, and “undocumented”).

As teachers and researchers, we feel this reflective work is important for at least two reasons. First, the narratives below took place in a family literacy program for speakers of English as an additional language. Such programs have been criticized in scholarly literature since the late 1980s for operating from deficit paradigms (e.g., Auerbach, 1989, 1995; Hannon, 2000; Rogers, 2003). Auerbach (1995) describes interventionist family literacy programs as assuming that “parents and other adult family members do not adequately use or value literacy, thus perpetuating a cycle of undereducation which is at the root of America’s social and economic problems” (p. 644). According to this perspective, then, parents with diverse literacy practices are at the root of some, if not many, of a country’s problems. Along with Auerbach (1995), we find this stance highly problematic. If we are to actively teach and research against deficit perspectives—instead privileging culturally-relevant and plurilingual approaches that draw on learner, family, and community funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992)—we find we must reflect on issues of language and power, and our own positionalities within these, as first steps toward transforming our own pedagogical and research practices (Farrell, 2007; Norton & Early, 2011).

Second, we resonate with the work of language learning scholars such as Bigelow (2007, 2010), Block (2005, 2009), Menard-Warwick (2005a, 2005b, 2009), Norton (1995, 2000, 2012), and others whose work

illustrates some of the diverse and contingent ways that migration, and concomitant “learning (of) a new language or taking on new literacy practices in a certain social context” (Menard-Warwick, 2009, p. 26), may entail complex identity negotiations. We understand adult and family literacy English-as-an-Additional-Language (EAL) classrooms as important sites for newcomers to negotiate and claim new identities for themselves (Pavlenko, 2004). As teachers and researchers, then, we find ourselves asking, “What are our roles in learners’ ongoing identity negotiations? How might our own identities and blind spots (Bigelow, 2016) aid or constrain us?” And, importantly, “What is specific to doing this work with SIFE women of color?” These are a few of the overarching questions we hope to bring to the fore in this paper.

The Teaching Context

The reflective teacher narratives below took place at an EAL family literacy program for refugee women in Clarkston, a renowned refugee resettlement hub on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. As of 2014, over 53 percent of Clarkston’s population of 7,717 was born outside of the U.S., over 40 countries were represented in the town’s 1.5 square kilometers, and nearly 60 percent of the population over age five spoke a language(s) other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The EAL family literacy program’s demographics mirrored those of Clarkston, with women from Burma, Bhutan, Afghanistan, the Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Liberia, and more.

The program was part of a faith-based non-profit organization, enrolling refugee women and their children aged birth to five. About 150 women and their children were enrolled, and each woman brought from one to three children. The program’s main goals were to prepare children for kindergarten, and to remove the barrier of childcare for women who desired to attend EAL classes. For the first two hours, women and children attended classes separately; for the last 30 minutes, mothers and children joined for family literacy activities. Once a week, the mothers’ classes came together for an educational assembly, an event that figures in Eker’s reflection below.

Most of the women had experienced interruptions in formal schooling, and many were emergent readers and writers, though some had high speaking proficiency in English, which was a second language for some, but a third, fourth, or more language for others. Each level at the school was taught by only one teacher; this provided teachers with much freedom in choosing or making their own materials, and even in determining what should be taught at their level. However, all were encouraged to include some form of civics instruction, which figures in both Williams’s and Yoder’s reflections below.

Terminology, Time, and Place

These narratives also unfolded at a particular place and time, specifically, the Southeastern United States during the 2014-2015 U.S. school year. During that time, social unrest was building in the U.S., surrounding decades of violence and injustices against African-American individuals and communities; we found that these events spilled over into our thinking about classroom incidents. For example, in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, and the ways Officer Wilson’s trial was handled, set off major protests around the U.S. and in the city where we resided: Atlanta, Georgia, a city that serves as a touchstone for U.S. civil rights, as reflected in Yoder’s narrative below. Unsurprisingly, the Black Lives Matter movement, which had begun the previous year, gained significant momentum in our city and nationwide.

We recognize that the historical, political, and social events that shaped our conversations and classrooms that year may be similar to, and different from, what teachers, administrators, and researchers have experienced in their own regions and countries. We also want to acknowledge the local nature of the terminology we have used in this paper surrounding racial and ethnic identifications. Our language is, of course, shaped by current U.S.- and Atlanta-based discourses surrounding these questions, and terms such as “White,” “African-American,” or “brown skin,” may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for some readers. In fact, we authors were not always comfortable with one another’s terms; what is written here is the product of compromise.

Enya
(Abi Yoder)

“Does anyone know what is special about today?” I asked my adult female students, seeking to position the day in the framework of the broader calendar year and connect to current events. It was Martin Luther King (MLK) Day, a U.S. holiday to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr., the Atlanta-born activist who received a Nobel Peace Prize and became a world figure for his civil rights work representing Black Americans in the U.S., “Do you know anything about MLK?” Calendar time that morning sparked a four-month unit on the 1950s and 1960s-era U.S. Civil Rights Movement, completed by a field trip to the MLK Center in downtown Atlanta, just minutes from where my class was conducted. I felt pretty proud myself, even connecting civil rights in the U.S. with events in my students’ home countries. The ladies seemed to really enjoy knowing that the city where they lived was significant in history.

However, I started to wonder about my own ability to teach this history. I had also just finished a master’s-level course advocating for reflective teaching practices (Richards & Farrell, 2011). Therefore, I started reflecting. I’m a White woman that grew up in a predominantly White community with schools that had White-centered curricula. Thus, growing up I had tragically never really learned much about the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. I decided I needed to, so I headed to the library after teaching. As I read, I kept wondering how a person with brown or black skin would view the history in the books I was reading. What were the biases I was missing? Why did there still seem to be so much tension over race right around me? Maybe I could just ignore these questions.

Then “Enya” showed up. She was a university-level service-learning student curious about learning to teach SIFE, and she had brown skin. I assumed she identified as African-American (and not, for example, as an international student or recent immigrant to the U.S.) since she used a variety of English that is common in Atlanta; I was suddenly frightened that my super-White background would be exposed and reveal me as an imposter attempting to teach this sensitive subject. What if I was teaching in a way that made Enya feel disrespected? What if I was teaching the students about civil rights in such a simplified way that they assumed that “all was good” across the whole of the country? How would the women refugees in my classroom reconcile school narratives (i.e., “You are safe in the U.S.”) with state-sanctioned violence against people of color, as demonstrated by daily news coverage of the Michael Brown case and the Black Lives Matter Movement? Were the women in my class experiencing racialized identities, as the Somali youth in Bigelow’s (2010) work did? Could I teach any of this to a class made up of students from seven different countries with seven different languages of which I could barely speak one?

Even though my students were at beginning levels of English, I still wanted to communicate all the ideas I had surrounding mutual respect and equity. But, Enya’s presence made me wonder: Did I even really know how to respectfully speak of my country’s Civil Rights Movement? And did I know how to prepare my students for situations in which they may be unfairly and incorrectly judged for the color of their skin?

I saw I had entered a crisis. There was so much I wanted to communicate: People are people. Everyone should be respected. Every person is equally important. I want my students to feel welcomed and valued in the U.S. and to value others. So, I was left with several questions. Is it possible to teach such nuanced concepts to very beginning English learners? Should I even have delved into these deep waters without being confident that I understood the current and historical injustices surrounding race in our country? Is it even possible to completely understand these things? Should I have asked a cultural informant to assist me in navigating these questions (Kinloch & Medge, 2014)?

One of my professional values is to be constantly developing and reflecting in ways that can help me grow. I’m thankful for the tension I’ve felt because it has caused me to stop and evaluate my core beliefs behind my teaching. I don’t have all the answers, but I wonder how the class might have been different if I had asked someone to help me navigate these waters. Growing as a teacher is about becoming more aware and informed about myself, my students, pedagogy, and the world around me. I know this takes time, so I will give myself grace, but not excuses. Delpit (1995) reminds me that I have the responsibility to examine and attempt to overcome stereotypes and the barriers that prevent me from seeing others clearly. How can I do this? Maybe I could have a discussion where students share what it means for them to be who they identify as. Perhaps I

could try to find new ways and spaces for my very diverse church to include racially educating one another as part of the ethos of the church. Maybe I can read more about Whiteness, as well as study and learn what anti-racist pedagogies are and how I might take them up. I don't want to stay where I am. I must keep growing. I owe it to myself and my students.

A Paradox of Shifting Identities (Heike Williams)

My story of how events unfolded that day in class don't actually begin in class. Rather, my story begins by sharing that I grew up for the first thirteen years of my life in the Southeastern United States, and Atlanta, Georgia, specifically. Atlanta prides itself on many things, including a booming business sector, its prominent position in the 1950s and 60s era U.S. civil rights movement, being the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and being a very racially and ethnically diverse international city, which is partially reflected in its status as a refugee resettlement hub. To me, being from Atlanta means that I constantly have opportunities to learn and grow as I live in this diverse city, which challenges me to question my perspectives and broaden my world views.

My story also begins with sharing that for the past three years, I have been attending a very transcultural church. We have a heart for racial reconciliation and to see people from all over worshipping Jesus together.

My story also begins with me being White. My Whiteness was never something I thought about until I moved to Asia after graduating from university to teach English for two years, and I looked different than almost everyone else. I was given privileges my national friends did not receive (e.g., jumping the line, being invited to banquets), and I was prevented from doing other things (e.g., not standing out in a crowd, buying things as cheaply as nationals). Now back in the U.S., I finally realize what was right under my nose my entire life: being White obviously entails privileges here, too. Of course, the privileges and power I experience in the U.S. are far too numerous and complex to name in this short reflection -- but in EAL classrooms, I am seen as an authority and a representative of U.S. teachers, amongst other things (some of which I may not even know). I'm still learning what it means to be White and how Whiteness influences the ways I think, act, and understand the world around me. As I do this, I am attempting to uncover some of the barriers that prevent me from seeing my students and myself as Delpit (1995) advocates for.

My story also begins with the fact that I was born an American citizen, as were my parents and grandparents. Many families in the U.S. have migrated more recently than my ancestors did; I have never had to reconcile more than one national identity. So, my history, heritage, and identities influenced the ways I responded to the events of class on the day in question.

The women in my class were sitting on metal folding chairs behind a long wooden table facing the whiteboard smudged grey with traces of past lessons; they carefully copied what I'd been writing on the board: nationalities and languages, the purpose of that day's Civics lesson surrounding President Obama. Our walls were dotted with pictures of former and current students, vocabulary words, Language Experience Approach (Taylor, 1992) stories on poster paper, and the lyrics of children's songs for parent and child time. "I am from Burma, I am Burmese, and I speak Burmese/Karen/Karenni," my students wrote, and we practiced saying. Since President Obama's mother is from the United States, he is American. His father is from Africa (Kenya, therefore he might also identify as African or Kenyan.

My dear student from Togo leaned over to my student from the Congo and said, "You are from Africa and when you become a citizen, you will be African-American!" The two women laughed at the word play and creativity they had accomplished in their new language. My mind immediately sounded an alarm, and I thought silently, "No you won't be."

I was struck with the paradox, the dilemma. Yes, when you pass the citizenship test you will be an American citizen, and yes, you're African. But no, you're not African-American. Or is she? For a moment I had a flicker of, "Yes? Becoming a U.S. citizen would mean becoming African-American?" My internal thoughts came out in a muddled disarray, as I tried to help my student find the language she wanted to describe her continually shifting identity positions, while also navigating the complex historical waters of race labels in the United States, which, as a new arrival to the U.S., I assumed were unfamiliar to her. "No, you are not African-American," I said after a second or two, "... you could be an American who is from Africa..." My student gave me a strange look. I don't think it clarified things for her.

I moved on. I did not know how to respond or teach to the situation without delving into history and politics, and I feared losing the students very quickly. Honestly, I am still not even sure if it was my place to respond in that situation. Later I realized that I want my student to be proud of her heritage and the richness and depth she brings to her new home. I had been simultaneously concerned that the term African-American might obscure her Congolese-ness in everyday speech, and that, in using this term to self-identify, she might unwittingly wade into deep and complicated political and historical waters. Without realizing it, I was trying to protect her.

Today, my response would be different. Instead of telling her she “can’t” use a specific term to self-identify, I might suggest she consider how she feels about the term “Congolese American.” I might try to explain that the term “African-American” is complicated because some people disagree about what this term conveys or should convey. Some argue (although not uncontroversially) it should be reserved only for those Americans who are descendants of the U.S. slave trade, and not more recent African immigrants such as my Congolese student (e.g., Dickerson, 2005). I wondered if maybe someone who had migrated from the Congo to the U.S. could speak with more authority and complexity regarding the ways some members of the local Congolese community choose to self-identify. Of course, regardless of what others have chosen, no one (including me) can decide for my student what language reflects the way she self-identifies. This is a language she will have to come to and negotiate on her own, and within her various communities.

As I reflect on the three seconds in which these events unfolded, I see that, for me, there was a convergence of head-knowledge, teaching knowledge, background knowledge, and a desire for clarity. Will others label my student and her family as African-American without their consent or knowledge? How will her life be affected by others’ perceptions of her heritage? How will her experience of her skin color be different here than in the Congo?

This situation, while it unfolded in only three seconds, has me wondering. As discussed in the introduction to our paper, learning an additional language is an identity shifting experience (Norton, 2012). After this experience, I now question more than ever: As a teacher, what is my role in the classroom when it comes to identity and race? Because of my background – my history, hometown, church, Whiteness, awarenesses – what classroom situations should I lean into and which are best left for others to tackle? Mostly I am left with questions.

Negotiating Power and Distance: Discussions of Motherhood Across Cultures (Ashley Ekers)

I have never been married and I have no children. This created a little discomfort in me when I started teaching in an EAL family literacy program whose mission included supporting refugee women in their roles as mothers. As a supplement to language instruction, the program held weekly topical assemblies on subjects such as family nutrition, the importance of reading to children, dental hygiene, birth control, and engaging babies with dialogue. During assemblies, I noticed the women in our classes were mainly *receiving* information, with much of the content aimed at familiarizing them with the attitudes toward gender and motherhood that the White, middle-class “native” English-speaking presenters, including me, had grown up with. Sometimes this was explicitly stated, as in sessions about “appropriate” child discipline; at other times it was implied. While the women always appeared appreciative, frequently expressing thanks for the opportunity to learn things they said they didn’t know before, I often wondered how they felt about the assemblies. In a classroom environment like this there are variables of race, gender, and class that both the teachers and students find their own ways to negotiate (Delpit, 1995). Were my students finding these ideas of motherhood encouraging and helpful, or were they possibly confusing, or clashing with their own thoughts about their roles in their families? What power differentials and cultural gaps were going unacknowledged during these sessions?

I wanted to explore how I could uncover these with my students but knew it could be particularly challenging to sustain these conversations with emergent readers and adults with interrupted schooling. Often the ways in which experiences can be readily shared between students of various language backgrounds require higher levels in the language(s) being learned than were present in my beginning level English classroom. I was genuinely interested in my students’ experiences and finding a way to create a collaborative classroom culture, but I also knew I was motivated by my own insecurities as an educator. I felt unable to connect with my students

over their roles as wives and mothers, so another goal was to turn this into an opportunity to put the students into the roles of experts and informants for a portion of a class. I wanted to do this in a way that would strengthen the classroom community without placing any unwanted informant burden on them.

I modified questions related to motherhood across countries and cultures from a report made by journalist Olga Khazan (2015), with an eye toward my class time constraints and students' language levels. My first prompt was a seemingly simple question, "What is a mother?" I was unsurprised when the women's answers mirrored what they had heard during our school assemblies which, in turn, replicate common motherhood discourses in the U.S.; for example, "Mothers are their children's primary teachers" (Hendrix, 1999; Smythe, 2006; Rogers, 2003; Smythe & Isserlis, 2004).

One group of women huddled around their paper crafting their collective answer, and I noticed their adjectives orbited around a theme as the mother as a powerful figure. The next question asked them to share beliefs or traditions about pregnancy and motherhood from their home countries. Some women laughed as they told me about fathers who prayed for male children and others shared rumors, they'd heard of some women being able to transfer their labor pains to their partners. The mood was sometimes light and sometimes serious, but the dialogue was active, and my students were engaged.

My final question asked how they felt being a mother in the United States was different from in their home countries, and what they felt was most difficult about being a mother here. The students answered so passionately and quickly that I wondered if they'd previously had this discussion outside of the classroom. Some of the women talked about the contrast between keeping their children in their apartments versus the freedom they had in their previous communities when they knew and trusted all their neighbors. Another student, who was a little older than the others, talked about the selfishness of mothers in the United States and their propensity for divorce. I wondered what would have happened if this student had shared her feelings during an assembly time, with mothers from the United States around to hear her perspective. It appeared to me that her impressions of mothers in the U.S. bothered her, and I wondered if any of her English teachers had been able to help her process her perspectives or had thought to ask what they were.

Reflecting on the activity after class, I realized I had been treating motherhood as a foreign concept. My relationship to the stories of motherhood I've heard from family and friends was through relational proximity, not because I had lived them, and in this way, I saw a potential connection between some of my students' experiences and my own. Someday I may try to reconcile the myths of motherhood with its reality, and currently, my students were trying to reconcile the realities of their lives in Atlanta and the U.S. with things they had heard before coming, photos they had seen, the expectations they had built up. I realized that in admitting to my students my feelings of being an outsider to motherhood that the classroom had begun to feel more equalized *for me*. It seemed my students enjoyed the discussion and responded positively to acting as informants, but I don't know for certain. I do know that the process of attempting to expose and discuss power differentials in my class led to an interruption of my normal class activities, and to realizing the ways I had been unintentionally placing barriers between myself and my students with my assumption that I could not connect with them in their roles as mothers (Delpit, 1995). In inviting my class to potentially see me in a different role than they usually do (learner vs. educator) I was able to see them in a more holistic way as well. As a teacher I think it will be important to find more ways to integrate my students' language learning into the disruption of my assumptions of distance within the classroom.

A Colleague's Summative Reflections (Nicole Pettitt)

Each of the above narratives reflects a teacher's work to understand her own positionality and power in supporting learners' identity negotiations or sense-making surrounding questions of race or gender. Each teacher showed us a moment in which she began to "recognize...the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other" (Delpit, 1995, p. 134). While Delpit argues we must not only recognize but also "overcome" (p. 134) these obstacles, my co-authors' reflections cause me to wonder if such overcoming is possible, and what it entails.

For instance, for Williams and Yoder, a primary concern centered on their roles as White teachers encountering questions of race in classrooms for SIFE women of color in the United States. Some of their words and phrases gave me pause; "Frightened," "exposed," and "not sure if it was my place," underscored for

me Williams's and Yoder's uncertainty about their roles and paths forward, reflecting a depth of professional vulnerability that I consider to be a gift. For Williams and Yoder, questioning whether to remain silent on issues of race and racial labeling in their classrooms did not appear to be a form of resistance or denial, but rather as an earnest desire to learn more before speaking. As we wrote and worked through the difficult content in this paper, we agreed that, "any system of domination can be seen most clearly from the subject positions of those oppressed by it" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 5). In order to understand such systems at work, then, it is necessary to make space for and listen to voices that have historically been silenced—while recognizing that "the very decision to 'move over' or retreat can occur only from a position of privilege"; the choices to decenter one's perspective (or not) is "an extension or application of privilege, not an abdication of it" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 24-25). With Alcoff's cautions in mind, Williams and Yoder incite me to wonder: How might keeping silent in order to listen work toward "overcom(ing) power differentials" (Delpit, 1995, p. 134) or not?

Ekers added another layer to these questions. She purposely attempted to decenter her teacher position, instead taking up the position of learner (of motherhood) and felt this began to equalize power between herself and students. Certainly, the learners were newly positioned as teachers, and they could take up or reject this position (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). As the classroom teacher, however, Ekers set the direction for class that day—a common action for teachers, yet some might consider antithetical to the project of equalizing power. So, I wonder, in what ways might social positioning like that which took place in Ekers's classroom also serve to "overcome power differential(s)" (Delpit, 1995, p. 134) or not? Additionally, how might such social positioning be helpful or a hindrance when working with those SIFE who hold firm views on "appropriate" teacher-student hierarchies?

With this paper, we have sought to lay open some of our ongoing questions surrounding the possibilities of teachers working against systemic injustices surrounding race and gender that permeate EAL classrooms at all levels. We have wondered if these questions may be particularly challenging to address in classes with beginning level learners, and those whose educational needs center on the most basic literacy practices, such as understanding conventions of print. As stated in our Introduction, we invite public reflection on these questions, and hope this paper will incite further discussion.

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