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## **An Arab American Boy Fights for his Voice: Finding Identity within Literature**

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### **Abstract**

The literacy experiences of Arab American youths are often overlooked in the US, and this paper examines the reading responses of one Arab 5<sup>th</sup> grader as he struggles for agency in a classroom of majority culture fellow students. This study follows the book talk of a class dealing with a text about immigration. Though he often struggles to contribute his perspective, as an actual immigrant himself, he is sometimes ignored and frustrated. This paper looks at this issue through Fairclough (2001) and van Dijk's (1985, 2001) critical discourse lens, examining the intersectionality of racial, gender, and power issues in the microcosm of the literature study group. His cultural identity, perhaps a hybrid between the dominant US culture and his heritage Egyptian home culture, may manifest in such interactions. In a book discussion of Jane Kurtz' *Faraway Home*, perhaps themes of the text mirror the student's own struggles for belonging and search for identity in US society.

**Key words:** Arab America; Literature discussion; Immigrant youth; Hybrid cultural identity; Fairclough; van Dijk, Critical discourse

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## Introduction

‘Hey guys,’ Jason cries, ‘Let me talk!’

In Mrs. Smith’s fifth-grade classroom, the Muslim Arab American boy from Egypt fights to be heard in his class. With an intellect poised to speak and share, Jason usually has something to say about any topic. He is engaged and gregarious, always enthusiastically offering his opinions. On any given day, he always wants to make his views heard in the classroom discourse. At other times, particularly during any discussion on Arab culture, he would correct the pronunciation of his peers and even Mrs. Smith. On this particular occasion, he knows the topic quite intimately, that of immigration, for he is an immigrant himself. Yet his voice is sometimes silenced, and his Caucasian American classmates can even ignore his input entirely.

Mrs. Smith generally supports Jason’s case to be heard, yet at other times, she also asks him to be quiet, and along with his peers, silences his voice. While Mrs. Smith believed she was maintaining the equilibrium of her classroom by quieting these students’ bantering, I saw these interactions as meaningful and necessary jockeying for power through language (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 36-63). Sometimes, however, it seemed Jason’s contributions were suppressed, relegated to background murmur. As a doctoral student assisting the university researcher with her study of the reading experiences of elementary students, I listened to Jason during my transcriptions of these interviews, I found myself rooting for his voice, for his contributions to be heard by his classmates, but oftentimes they were not. Why was this happening? Is there a purposeful quieting of some students in our educational system? Are the voices of Arab American students being silenced in our schools?

Currently, there are 2.6 million Arab-Americans in the United States, two-thirds of them foreign-born (Arab American Institute Foundation, 2014). The most represented nations of origin are Iraq, Somalia, and Egypt. Their experience in the US is mixed, as their treatment by others in this country is not all positive. Anti-Arab hate crimes have increased significantly since 9-11, and although those who identify as Arab hail from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, with a range of different national and cultural ties, this diverse population is treated by

many with undifferentiating mistrust and hostility. Xenophobia and Islamophobic sentiments in particular, have become an international issue in recent years (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014), one that begs national attention.

Understanding these issues can be a complex task since, in the dynamic structure of our language classrooms, there are different levels of power at play (Fairclough, 2001, p.25), between the teacher and student, the students among each other, and within the student herself. For example, immigrant students marginalized by their non-native status in our schools may be drowned out by the mainstream, dominant voice (Stromquist, 2012), preventing the heteroglossia of diverse voices inside the classroom from being heard (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, American education then misses reflecting the full spectrum of our vibrant cultural tapestry.

Given the global climate, Arab youths in particular necessitate the teacher to exercise tact in addressing these sensitive cultural issues (El-Haj & Renda, 2006). Evident in this discourse is the patriotism and pride in one's different culture, which cannot be muzzled by a Eurocentric, White, male, heterosexual, English-only monoglossia (Beck, 2015; Flores & Schissel, 2014). The Arab population in classrooms should be a fruitful subject for analysis given current events, and within the last decade there has been a greater number of research targeting Arab American literate experiences (e.g., Phelps, 2010).

The words of teachers and classmates influence, and can at times marginalize Arab students, preventing their perspective about the discussion topic from entering the classroom dialogue. Research shows that when the topic is focused on books in a literature circle context, it is to the benefit of all students if all voices can be heard, especially if they represent divergent frames of reference (Daniels, 2002, pp. 26-27). This way, a child's notion of a work of literature may be embellished by various interpretations, opening their minds to multitudinous voices and perspectives.

### **A Critical Discourse Lens**

This study will utilize a critical discourse lens to tease out both pedagogical and social justice issues in the literacy instruction of minority students (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 193-202). Critical discourse studies seek to identify and analyse language use and especially its connection to

power within relationships. When the speaker does not represent the standard dialect of the mainstream community, they are at a disadvantage in being recognized as a group member by the class. In this vein, discourse analysis takes into account ‘the social macro-micro link – defined in terms of group membership of social actors and of their actions taken as instantiations of social relations, processes, or structures’ (van Dijk, 1985, p.137). Fairclough (2001) asserts that ‘language contributes to the domination of some peoples by others’ (p. 4). In this sense, the utterances of people can serve as source of power, and can be utilized to wield social hegemony. When the voices of some parties are ignored, and are drowned out by the dominant mainstream discourse, a severe misallocation of power is at play. These students may feel overshadowed and their voices silenced in this context leading to social exclusion in the classroom.

In this sociolinguistic approach, there is a focus on socially-conditioned variances in language, in ‘systematic correlations between variations in linguistic form (phonological, morphological, syntactic) and social variables – the social strata to which speakers belong, social relationships between participants in linguistic interactions...and so on’ (Fairclough, 2001, p. 6). Stratification in society, and in our schools, creates and is identified by stratification in language and discourse. When students are cast in lower or marginalized social strata, and their input neglected or devalued, they may experience lower self-esteem, and damage to their self-concept, especially at younger ages. Particularly relevant to this study is that critical discourse recognizes ‘power relationships between social groupings...ethnic groupings, between young and old’ and other strata of society (Fairclough, 2001, p. 28). Furthermore, there are efforts by those with power to impose ‘an ideological common sense’ on everyone in the community (p. 71).

Also pertinent to this discussion is the idea of subject positions as diverse and potentially contradictory (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p.197). Young people may negotiate their various and shifting roles, and assume or resist certain social identities or subject positions. Because one’s personal culture potentially influences the interpretation of text, a diverse group of readers will undoubtedly result in a myriad of different readings (Cai, 2008, p.

212). Thus diverse voices of society and the world can come together to transact with the text and discuss their unique reading experiences.

Analyses from critical discourse are not simple, as it often 'requires true multidisciplinary, and an account of intricate relationships between texts, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture' (van Dijk, 2001, p.253). In thus framing thinking around Jason's role in the classroom and in his smaller book discussion group, one can see the effect of these multiple factors at play. There are truly many processes that affect discourse, how it is intended, how it is perceived, and what effect it may have on the reading experience.

### **The Arab World in US Schools**

#### **Treatment of Arab Culture in US Schools**

Since 9-11, even such sanctioned institutions as schools have not escaped the dualistic oversimplification of 'Americans' as good and Arabs as evil (Saleem & Thomas, 2011). But it is exactly such democratic institutions which 'can play a pivotal role in diffusing the tension between the [Arab] minority and the hostile majority culture' (p. 15). When our children can learn to empathize with a vilified culture, perhaps they can learn to view the world through multiple perspectives, and appreciate the complexities in life by attaining multiple I-positions (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992). However, I-positions are not the same as subject positions, as the former refers to internally-oriented subjectivities and the latter denotes external societal designations. The reader's I-positions are roles the individual assumes from within, while subject positions are often determined from the outside by others. American textbooks have been found to adhere to a certain agenda in presenting Arab culture, and the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the US response (Saleem & Thomas, 2011). These agendas range from cautionary warnings about impulsive US reactions to patriotic explanations of the war against terror, to enlarging the scope of the attacks to encompass an extension of conflicts in the Middle East. In each case, the text used to frame instruction in the American educational system may portray biased views of the world.

The majority of schools in North America have failed in their efforts to incorporate respect for Arab components into their pedagogy (Memon, 2010). Arab families have

advocated establishing supplemental religious education, quite common in the US in various faith communities, such as among Jews, and Roman Catholics. As a result, there has been a spike in such Islamic schools in recent years. Islamic pedagogy entails traditional subjects, such as biology, physics, and chemistry, along with learning the Quran and guest talks from Islamic scholars. In this way, children can learn needed knowledge about their physical world, as well as bolstering their spiritual know-how. North American instructors working in such institutions have been trained in the Islamic ways of managing a classroom, in a way which emphasizes caring and kindness, including motivating students through use of the Prophet Muhammad's wisdom (Memon, 2010). Contrary to the mainstream US culture, there is no separation of the secular from the religious. In fact, some in this culture have equated 'the study of religion to the study of mankind' (Alghorani, 2008, p. 5), therefore deserving to be part of a child's education. All schools in the United States should be geared towards a sensitive approach to incorporating the needs of all students, especially those who have been stigmatized. Only in this way can there be a true, genuine dialogue between the two cultures, through which greater understanding and empathy can be engendered. Indeed, the treatment of Arab students in our classrooms deserves special tact these days.

### **Experience of Arab Students in American Schools**

There has been a significant increase in Arab students in US schools in recent decades (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). There may be in these schools, however, a lack of awareness of their culture, which when combined with existing anti-Islamic sentiments, can create a hostile, unwelcoming environment. Research has found social isolation for Arab students both inside and outside of the classroom, and experiences of both overt and covert racism (Shammas, 2015).

Arab-American students can encounter discrimination from teachers, school administrators, and classmates (Aroian, 2012). In fact, school settings are prime environments for this harassment. There are even gendered differences in their harassment, as Arab boys are prone to being physically bullied at school, while Arab girls are even at risk in public places. There is an ever-present adjustment of socially situated identity for these Arab-American

students (Mir, 2011). This population group contends with the reality of never being able to fully integrate into American culture. There is always the sense that White, European, and Christian family background is the definition of an American, and those who do not fall into these categories somehow fall short of being a true American. So, these Arab-American students must contend with their or their culture's different language, attire, cuisine, and customs.

According to some scholars, 'public schools, as microcosms of society, reflect the narrow and negative presentations of Muslims in the wider world' (Tindongan, 2011, p. 73). Most teachers and classmates in American education institutions are unaware of much of Islam, and in fact, in our school settings, 'identity and culture are secondary issues or are even absent.' So, how does this neglect impact the psyche of Jason, and other students like him? How do we, as instructors, address these issues, incorporating them into the classroom dialogue?

### **Children's Literature and the Arab World**

Children's literature in Arab countries is loaded with ideological and moral lessons for young readers (Mdallel, 2003). Much of the subject matter contained in such works document the Prophet Muhammad's biography or some type of religious fiction. Other strong themes include morality and didacticism, intended to act as ethical guides for children. Specifically in Egypt, texts have combined religion with children's literature curricula to transmit religious themes in traditional pedagogic formats (Starrett, 1996). For example, drawings, computer software, and other activities have been devised that incorporate both the spiritual and the secular.

Currently, there has been an emphasis on creating texts in children's literature that respect Arab culture in the United States, and create positive images of Arab heritage for the general population (Al-Hazza, 2006). Such picturebook texts, like *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* (Heide, Gilliland & Lewin, 1995) and *Sami and the Time of Troubles* (Heide & Gilliland, 1995), present Arab culture and life in socially-conscious ways, transmitting a more candid portrayal of Arab life. Finally, one book that is particularly pertinent to the present discussion

is *Sitti's Secret* written by Naomi Shihabb Nye and illustrated by Nancy Carpenter, about one Palestinian American's journey with her father to Palestine to visit her grandmother (Nye & Carpenter, 1994). Before leaving the US to visit the small Palestinian village on the West Bank, the main character, Mona, dreams about her grandmother's home by imagining the landscape. So, like Desta, the protagonist of *Faraway Home*, the text discussed in depth later, Mona is also an Arab American who imagines her faraway home and reconnects with her heritage in the context of the US. Desta actually keeps her grandmother's picture on her locket, which also parallels Mona's reunion with *her* grandmother. Thus, with such breadth of texts available, courses which are privy to such literature may provide a more dynamic and positive portrayal of Arab culture.

### **The Study**

#### **Jason, the Arab American boy**

This article analyses the experiences of one Egyptian-American boy, Jason (a pseudonym) in an elementary school in Georgia composed of 20% White students, 53% Black students, 22% Hispanic students, and 2% Asian, with about 3% multi-raced. The city of Georgia is unique as the home of the University of Georgia; it is made up of a racially diverse populace, and is one of the most racially diverse and tolerant cities in Georgia (Athens Clarke County Unified Government, 2010). Jason is observed in a fifth-grade literature discussion classroom in September of 2010. Jason is an Egyptian-born ten-year-old living with his Egyptian parents. He came to the US at a very young age, and speaks native-like English, though without a Southern Georgia accent. Arabic was his first language when he was younger, as his most frequent interactions were with his parents in Arabic, but since the start of formal schooling, English has fast become his most proficient vernacular. Jason comes from a literate household, with professional parents. He excels in his scholastic courses and it is obvious he receives supplemental tutoring outside of class, given his superior world knowledge. However, socially Jason is somewhat isolated. He is gregarious and outgoing, but is at times excluded from the main social circles in the classroom.

Managing turn taking was an issue Jason experienced, which according to Fairclough (2001), manifests the power relationships between participants: ‘between equals [...] it is assumed that all participants have equal rights at each point in the formula – to select others, “select themselves”, or continue’ (p. 112). In the specific case of Jason in his class, there may be evidence of ‘the more powerful participant[s] putting constraints on the contributions of less powerful participants,’ namely Jason (p. 113). Also, students in the class bring with them their own sets of ideologies and concepts about the world, which ‘organize social group attitudes consisting of schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues’ (van Dijk, 1985).

In his fifth grade class, he is the only immigrant child, and in the small book discussion group he is the only non-White student. He is keenly aware of his position inside the classroom as an outsider, and often fights to be heard despite his obvious above average intelligence and sensitivity. Jason’s peers in the smaller book talk group are Caucasian Americans. Ironically, being an outsider may privy Jason to a more intimate knowledge of his host culture. In fact, according to Bakhtin, there is ‘a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own’ (1986, p. 6). There is always a dialogue between cultures, and one cannot shirk one’s native culture completely. In fact, to truly understand a culture, one must be located outside it, gaining a meta-perspective. Therefore, Jason and other Arab Americans may understand more of the American culture than cultural natives, or natural-born Americans, for ‘in the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding’ (p. 7). Thus, this boy must engage with the course material, the teacher, his fellow classmates, and his own heritage inside the classroom in his educational experience, juggling these various dimensions to arrive at understanding. Evident through his discourse, he is intelligent, sensitive, and conscious of his identity and heritage. His place inside the classroom is both as a voice of reason and one of superfluity, peripheralization.

## The Picturebook

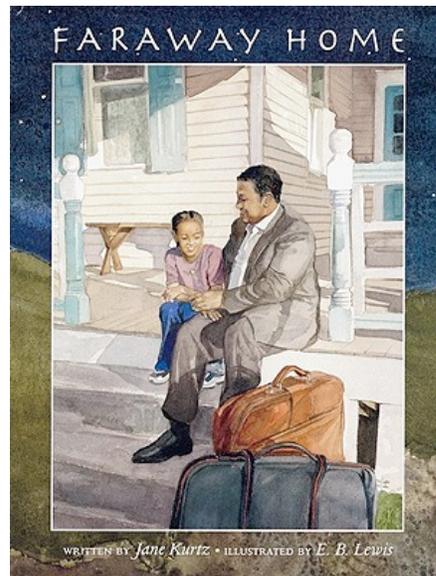


Figure 1: Front cover of Kurtz, J. & Lewis, E.B. (Illus). (2000). *Faraway home*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

In the fall of 2010, Mrs. Smith's fifth-grade class studied *Faraway Home* (Kurtz & Lewis, 2000). The text, with beautiful watercolour illustrations, tells the story of Desta's discovery of her Ethiopian heritage. The picturebook consists of multiple themes, the most poignant of which are immigration and the idea of home. It is interesting to note that the author Jane Kurtz was born in Oregon, but moved to Ethiopia with her family when she was only two. When she came back to the States for college, however, she felt an utter estrangement in her new home, and longed for the African nation. So there is definitely a connection between the author and the content of the story, which adds to the veracity of her narrative. The text begins with Desta finding a green envelope informing her of her grandmother's illness back in Ethiopia, from where her family hails. Her father must now return home to be with her. When Desta objects to her father leaving for such a faraway place, her father explains how Ethiopia is never far from his heart.

'For me, Ethiopia is never far away' (Kurtz & Lewis, 2000: unpaginated), explains her father, who proceeds to reminisce about his childhood home with his daughter, about walking

barefoot to school chewing on sugar canes as snacks. At school the next day, Desta talks about her father's childhood with her friend, Christopher, who is incredulous about such a life, just then, as Desta begins to feel a bit ashamed of her culture, she remembers the locket with her grandmother's face, which she wears above her heart. This prompts a shift in her thinking, and reconnects her with her heritage. On the way home that day, she decides to take off her shoes and walk home barefoot as her father did as a young man back in Ethiopia. The story ends with Desta back home, and her father singing to her, as she begins dreaming about Ethiopia, her 'faraway home'.

One of the major themes embedded in this text is the need to love and to be loved (Zeece, 2001). Love, in this context, perhaps refers to that between family and friends. This theme is one to which Jason was particularly attentive. Desta's confrontation and complexity in dealing with her identity in her new country perhaps parallels Jason's own experience in this country. Thus, we can hypothesize there is a strong text-to-reader connection for Jason (Rosenblatt, 1994). Another major theme discussed is that of home. Home comes to include Ethiopia for Desta as the story progresses, and she reconnects with her heritage. Jason adds, 'I think home is more than a house. I think it's surrounded by love or loved ones.' This is perhaps what Desta comes to believe as well, as her sense of home expands from her physical home to a faraway location with heritage ties and ancestral stories.

Kurtz uses condensed sentences full of descriptive imagery and metaphor. For example, in describing Desta's relationship with her father, she writes: 'When evening comes, as soft as a curtain closing, Desta's father takes her in his arms.' She writes with a refined grace that connects with readers of all age levels, so that fifth-grade children with first languages other than English may also enjoy the book.

Each page contains beautiful watercolour illustrations. There are portraits of Desta with her mother at the doorway when she discovers the letter, the painting of Desta's father carrying her up the stairs on his back, and the illustration of the lunch room scene when she shares her father's recount of Ethiopia with her friend at school. But, these pictures are contrasted with the lush, pastoral scenes depicted of Ethiopia, with the green foliage and the tan and beige tinted cattle grazing in the fields. The front cover shows a grinning Desta and

her father sitting on the porch steps, perhaps when she sends him off to Ethiopia, and the back cover shows a pair of hyenas on an Ethiopian dune under the gaze of a magnified full moon. There is certainly juxtaposition in the paintings of a bucolic Ethiopia and an urbanized United States, both depicted in vibrant and flowing watercolour, perhaps adding to the distinctions between the two settings.

### **The Book Discussion**

Jason's experience with the text and inside the context of his classroom will be analysed based on several theories. According to Rosenblatt (1994), during reading, the reader transacts with the text, which in conjunction with his or her mind, creates the story. In other words, the reader is as much a participant in the creation of the narrative as the author. This is particularly the case with Jason, who is also far away from his homeland, another African country. His transaction with the text brings specific aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1994, p.25) and efferent (Rosenblatt, 1994, p.23) responses his classmates do not share. None of his classmates really understands how it feels to be apart from one's home, feeling like an ethnic cultural and linguistic outsider. Thus, they may find it difficult empathizing with Desta's father.

Part of Jason's connection with the reading is with the language used. In Excerpt 1, he corrects the pronunciation of his peers of an Arabic name (B = boy and G = girl):

#### **Excerpt 1**

1 B1: And, what's her name?

2 Mrs. Smith: Her name is Farah. F-A-R-A-H

3 G1: There's another book that I know where they pronounced it Farra.

4 Mrs. Smith: I don't know.

5 Researcher: It's sort of like tomato tomaato. In the US, or in certain regions of the US, we're going to have that Farah. It could be like Caroline vs Carole-line. But, you make a good point. How you pronounce a name, and how important that is to pronounce it correctly.

6 Mrs. Smith: And Jenna, Jason really just connected that. Jason, can you say that again?

7 Jason: My cousin, her name is Farah. In Egypt, we call her Farah.

**8** Mrs. Smith: But, in the United States, what did you say? How is it pronounced?

**9** Jason: Some people call her Fare-rah

**10** Mrs. Smith: Right, depending.

**11** Researcher: So, when you're in your groups, you can decide whether you want to say it Fare-rah or Farah. Farah?

**12** Jason: Um-hm, Fa-Rah.

**13** [class practise saying name]

We can see that Jason acts as the expert, and the class respects his language skills. The teacher also contrasts the correct pronunciation with Americans' erroneous pronunciation (turn 8). This is followed by the class practising the correct version (turn 13). This is evidence of foreign-oriented students' funds of knowledge benefitting the classroom discourse (Moje et al., 2004).

Furthermore, central to the phenomenon of transaction in reading is the process of selective attention (Rosenblatt, 1986, pp.123-124). Because Jason is from an Arab-African country, he may pay particular attention to certain aspects of the setting. Furthermore, since he is an outsider in the United States, just like Desta and her family, he may feel an aesthetic response of kinship with the protagonist (Rosenblatt, 1994), where the stories of the heroine interact dialogically with his own life. In this dialogic experience, there may be an 'active-dialogic understanding', which deepens the depth of understanding and broadens the universality of the notion inferred from reading (Bakhtin, 1986). When readers are able to engage in these dialogic exchanges with literature, their understandings of the story may deepen as well.

The children are divided into small groups of five children, Jason's group is made up of three girls and two boys, one is Jason. They begin a discussion of their responses to *Faraway Home* based on some questions given to guide their responses. At the outset, there was a power struggle to be the first to voice his or her opinion (see Excerpt 2). In the beginning, the students start conversing about their personal meanings of home.

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**Excerpt 2:**

1 G1: OK, number 3: talk about your response to the question Mrs. Smith asked yesterday.

What does it mean...what does home mean to you after you have an initial talk?

2 G2: OK, wait, wait...First, what does home mean to you guys?

3 G1: OK, I'll go first.

4 Jason: Me

5 G1: Fine, he goes first.

6 G3: Guys are going first.

As they began sharing personal responses, some tensions were evident. To begin with, a female classmate declared she would be the first to share what home meant. But, immediately Jason interrupted, and the others acquiesce (turn 4). When the discussion group began attempting to define what home meant, the other group members struggled to find the exact page, two different students stated the need to look back at the text on a specific page. The second boy asks what the girls are looking for, and the girls respond by noting that Desta attends a private school and wears a uniform. All the while, Jason tries to engage everyone in discussion about the notion of home.

**Excerpt 3:**

1 Jason: Isn't it like a place where you live? It's not like some old shack you live. I think it's more like surrounded by love or loved ones. I think home is more than a house. I think it's surrounded by love or loved ones.

2 G3: Oh, OK.

3 G2: OK, mine is kinda simple. This is home: family, memories, fun, laughter, anger, sad, happy, safeness, and love.

4 G3: OK

5 B1 Alright, alright. Home: a place that has comfort, and love, and children.

6 Jason: Hey Ruby, did you share your set?

7 G3: Not yet. I think that a home is place from your childhood, maybe. Like with your family.

8 Jason: That's nice

- 9** G3: That's like your memories. OK, so...
- 10** Mrs. Smith: Now look, there's a question part to number 3.
- 11** G3: After you have finished talking, answer this question. (reads question)
- 12** Researcher: Talk about them. Don't write anything down yet. Talk about them, and then write down what you guys think.
- 13** B1: Well, I think...um, well, um...maybe because he grew up there, and you know...and he enjoyed being there.
- 14** G3: It's where his memories and love...
- 15** G4: Kind of with the parish and everything
- 16** Jason: Umm, well...if you leave a country and you're born there, and everyone in your family, it's not...it's still home.
- 17** G5: It's just a faraway home!
- 18** Jason: Umm if there's, if you go there, and there's no love, and there's not your loved ones, you still won't feel it's home

At first glance, the other group members allowing Jason to go first may seem compassionate, but after his wordy, well-thought-out response to what he thought home was (Excerpt 3, turn 1), the group members proceed to dominate the flow of the conversation. While his classmates discuss their personal definitions of home (turns 5, 7, 13 and 14), Jason tries to think about the concept in the vein of the text (turn 16). His understanding of home, of even when you leave the nation of your birth, how that nation is still your home because family is still there, is insightful and particularly important for this text. His understanding of home thus mirrors Desta's father's understanding.

This is perhaps due to personal similarities, of having left his African home for the US, perhaps of memories of loved ones still in Egypt. This idea of home is central to this piece, and Jason's own ideas of home could enhance the class's intercultural understanding. At the end of this excerpt, Jason talks about how if there were no love somewhere then it cannot be a home. Perhaps, this is how Jason has felt in the US. Had the teacher been in a position to follow up this statement, it could have been beneficial for the development of intercultural

communicative competence, and could have expanded understanding of the notion of home and the sense of alienation experienced by immigrants in the US.

In Jason's response to what a home consists of, he speaks of love and loved ones twice: 'It's not like some old shack you live. I think it's more like surrounded by love or loved ones. I think home is more than a house. I think it's surrounded by love or loved one' (Excerpt 3, turn 1). This answer is very appropriate, since one of the themes of the text is how the concept of home is not constrained by physical setting, but by family and love (Zeece, 2001). Even though Desta and her father live in the United States, Ethiopia is still considered home for them, because they have relatives and memories there. None of the other students respond to that emphasis, giving rather generic, itemized descriptions of home. Even though Jason gives a well-thought-out response, his peers do not respond with praise, but push on to the next question. Jason responds to his peers comments quite differently often commending their responses, saying, 'That's nice.'

In Excerpt 4, the group discusses a question in the worksheet which asks the students to assess whether Desta's definition of home has changed.

#### **Excerpt 4:**

1 G2: OK, now we need to look back in the text (Jason reads: Do you think Desta's definition of home changes?)

2 G2: Hold on... We gotta look back in the text

3 Jason: Yeah, but first...

4 G2: But, we gotta find a page that goes with it.

5 Jason: Yeah, but first...

6 B1: Tell me what?

7 G2: She goes to private school.

8 B1: Tell me what?

9 G2: Ha! She wears a uniform

10 Jason: Guys!! Let me talk. LET ME TALK!

11 G2: I know, I am! OK, go.

12 Jason: OK, like... I mean like you see like don't you think we should talk first?

**13 G2: Yes**

As the group members express the need to look back in the text, Jason says twice, 'Yeah, but first,' (turns 3 and 5) only to be ignored. The others have a parallel conversation of looking for specific examples and page numbers, and totally bypass Jason's contributions. This irritates him and he finally erupts, 'Guys! Let me talk! LET ME TALK!' (turn 10). There is clearly much emotion in these words, perhaps due to the frustration of being silenced. After this utterance, this bid for time to express himself, the other group members try to quiet him by giving in to his demands. But, as he proceeds to speak, the others do not really listen or react. It seems as Jason defines family for himself, the definition really does not register with the others. This is clearly an example of a limited pattern of access for his communication (van Dijk, 1993), thereby diminishing his power inside the classroom culture (Fairclough, 2001). Later on, the students continue their exchange and try to find the answers together.

**Excerpt 5:**

**1** Jason: But, didn't we read it yesterday?

**2** G1: Yes, yes. I found it around about here.

**3** B1: We have to read it over again.

**4** Jason: Do you guys have alternative memory? I mean...

**5** B1: No-o-o-o...

**6** G2: Get him paid

**7** G1: Hey, hey, hey... The recorder's on. Mrs. Smith and Ms. Graff are going to hear that, OK.

**8** Jason: I'm not saying that as an insult.

Excerpt 5 shows that Jason's condescending comment (turn 4) further alienates him with his peers, who actually remind him that the recorder is on, and that the teachers will hear his insult. Jason may have antagonized others by questioning their mental ability, by questioning their memory as being warped or 'altered'. Jason's discourse makes him an outsider, and may have excluded him from the mainstream culture of the classroom. Would it be better for Jason, and

others like him, to keep their mouths shut and win the affection of his peers? What would it take for a cultural outsider to be accepted into this society, for his or her views to receive appropriate acknowledgement? Simple assimilation may not be the solution, for then divergent views would somehow conform to a standard dialect (Bakhtin, 1981). Rather, the multiple voices, the multiple perspectives of our diverse classrooms need a platform and should be respected.

### **Discussion**

Egyptian-American students, like other Arab students, are confronted by specific peer and societal pressures nowadays (Mir, 2011). However, their voices cannot be suppressed in our schools, for dialogic discourse enriches the cultural tapestry of the American classroom. Classmates, especially those in the positions of power, in listening to and empathising with divergent voices, may be able to attain different perspectives to understand others. Thus, in attending to the voice of Jason and other Arab students, the richness of the classroom discourse is enhanced, deepened and diversified. With discussions of texts about minority cultures, critical readings may be important to broaden and heighten the awareness and agency of young students, leading to development of greater cultural understanding and insights (Howrey & Kim, 2009). The classroom dynamic demonstrated in these excerpts may be likened to a 'cultural invasion, which serves the ends of conquest and the preservation of oppression, and always involves a parochial view of reality, a static perception of the world, and the imposition of one world view upon another' (Freire, 1970, p. 160). As such, Arabs and other minority cultures may be invaded by the dominant US culture. Can we risk the disappearance of these voices in our classrooms?

The solution, perhaps, is allowing for true dialogue by hearing these minority voices in our mainstream classrooms. This is particularly true of literature discussion, represented as 'a living mix of varied and opposing voices, developing and renewing itself' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 49). By engendering true, authentic dialogic exchanges, meaning of the classroom discourse can be deepened and enhanced. Understanding and sharing of understanding can occur in a cooperative dynamic, instead of a uni-directional depositing of knowledge by the teacher.

Students can be active learners involved in making meaning and co-constructing their learning (Freire, 1970). This can be particularly beneficial for these previously marginalized students, as their voices can influence the dominant cultural discourse, and they can feel more a part of the world in which they live. Yet, true dialogue requires an active understanding of words, a mutually active construction of ideas (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, when Jason's voice is muted, there cannot be such genuinely shared construction of meaning.

But, perhaps Jason's contention to be heard in the classroom is not from feeling that he is silenced, but rather to make his contributions more apparent in the group. As heard in his class discussions, his voice is usually a tenor above the other students. So, in fact, when sometimes Mrs. Smith seeks to quiet him, it may be less to silence his Arab views and more because he is too loud, or to give others a chance to speak. It may not be solely due to his Arab background in this post 9-11 context that he is quieted, but other factors such as social capital and managing turn-taking could also play vital roles. As mentioned previously, his Arab identity may be concurrently engaged in dialogue with the text, with his classmates, his teacher, his personality, his gender, and with his larger cultural context of the southern United States (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, this complex dialogic interplay may also impact on the effect of his contributions.

Furthermore, perhaps, in the classroom, most of the students are trying to finish the teacher-assigned task, while Jason tries to build an active dialogue. The other students may just want to finish the assignment by looking back at specifics in the text, and feel that Jason's attempts to engage in dialogue are unduly hampering their progress. They finally acquiesce to his insistence, but he may have already antagonized the group. Their antagonism may therefore stem less from his heritage and more from his personality.

His attempts to enter into dialogue about the text may be an effort to bring more reader-response elements to transacting with the text (Rosenblatt, 1994). In traditional elementary Islamic schooling (maktab), such transactional elements are encouraged even in reading the Koran, so as to bring a more personal interpretation of the sacred book (Street, 1984). In traditional Islamic cultures, students are taught to 'rely less heavily on memorization and word-to-word repetition and instead exploit their ability to express the same meaning in

varied forms' (Street, 1984, p. 138), thereby being encouraged to contribute personal realities to enhance and expand meaning. Perhaps it is with this mentality that Jason desired to spur his classmates to generate a unique and individualized understanding of Desta's experience in the book, instead of searching for the exact words or phrasings of the author, perhaps more in line with his own heritage upbringing.

In any case, Jason's contributions as an immigrant boy from a northern African country would have been insightful, given his linguistic, cultural, and environmental affinities with the context and content of the picturebook. His linguistic and cultural contributions are important to bolster classmates' understanding of the book and intercultural communicative competence.

### **Future Research**

So for Jason, and other students like him, what is the reality of literacy classrooms in the US? Would his self-esteem be damaged? More attention is needed to address the long-term ramifications of power struggles and lack of power. Also, what measures should be undertaken by the instructor to oversee such engagements?

Furthermore, evident from this particular study is that apart from culture, gender appears to also be a factor in delegating the power inside the classroom. The female classmates seem more savvy about how to engage with their teacher, to appease her, while Jason is more focused on engaging with the narrative. The female students dictate the flow of discourse, and assume a position of power in their dialogues.

Also, there should be further inquiry into the contexts of family culture of these students. Not every Arab family is identical, so perhaps we should learn how the nuances of different families, such as occupation, influence the education of Arab youths. I wonder how Jason's family structure, and the stress placed on education, represents the dominant trend of that culture. Perhaps his family is connected with the University in Athens, and he thus comes from a privileged, academic kind of background.

In conducting this study of Jason, I have gained valuable insight into the literacy classroom discourse, especially the dynamics power plays. With our immigrant students, we

may arrive at a sense of alienation and estrangement (Stromquist, 2012). Perhaps Jason's notion of literacy, of being able to transact freely with what he reads (Street, 1984) runs counter to his classmates' correct-answer driven reading response. Perhaps this is indicative of our US testing culture, of finding the right answers rather than actual understanding and personal meaning-making (Sacks, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Nowadays in classrooms across the US, the tapestry of the student body is dramatically morphing (Davis & Bauman, 2008). There are increasing proportions of minority and immigrant students in our schools. When these students represent stigmatized demographics, their status inside the classroom becomes tentative, and extra care may be needed to counteract any factors of discrimination (El-Haj & Renda, 2006).

American teachers and schools need to address the needs of all students, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, religion or culture, so that they may participate in the ongoing classroom discourse. Only in this way can the many voices of reality be heard, and the true synthesis of knowledge be attained inside the classroom.

Culture, gender, and social class are important aspects of student identities. These criteria may impact their experiences in the classroom. As teachers and researchers, we may need to be aware of the multifarious implications these factors have, and choose texts that speak to these facets of identity, while facilitating critical dialogue about contingent issues. In this way, perhaps all students can learn to perceive and read the world using multiple voices.

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