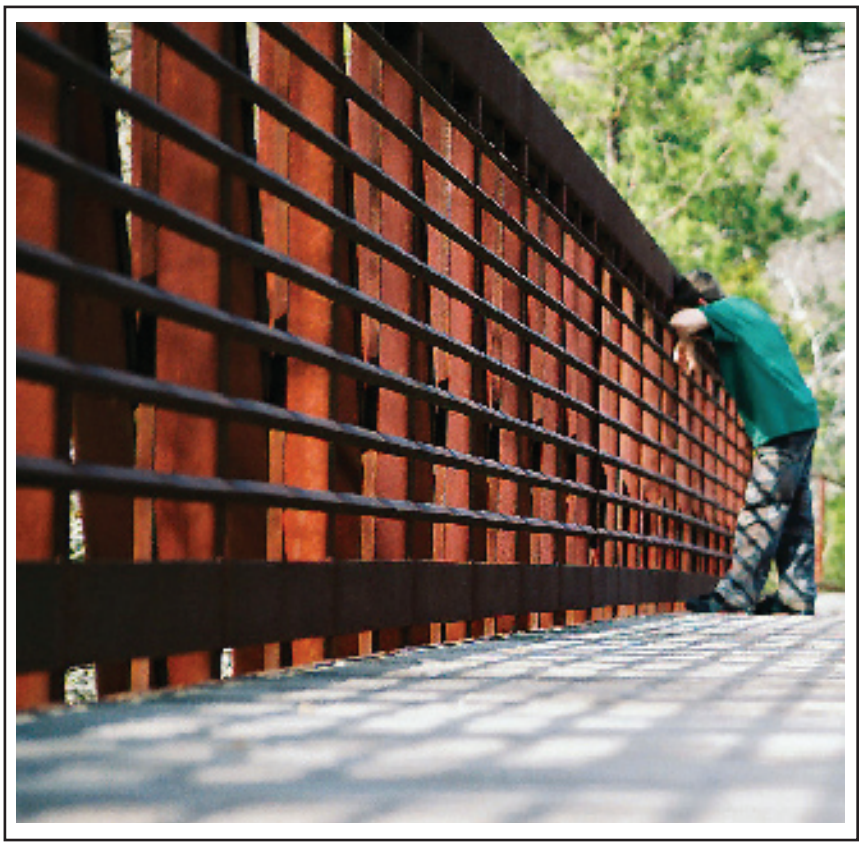

Iraqi Refugee Students

From a Collection of Aliens to a Community of Learners

Introduction

Some years ago, when I visited an elementary school in New York during their multicultural festival, a teacher excitedly commented on the song-and-dance performance of a group of recently arrived Russian immigrant students: "This festival is so good for them. This is the one day when the poor things can shine." An adult immigrant from Eastern Europe myself, with teaching experience on both sides of the Atlantic, I felt an acute sting from that remark.

"Those poor things," newly arrived at an American school, were still struggling with English, but they could handle math above their grade levels, and, as their music teacher discovered to her surprise, could not only read music, but also write it. They certainly did not need pity; what they needed were the same opportunities to learn and the same expectations of achievement as their native-born American peers.

The teacher's remark is symptomatic of the intentionally well-meaning, but in effect demeaning views of ethnic/cultural minority students, in particular, English language learners (ELLs). There is a consensus among teachers that cultural and linguistic diversity is a "value" and a "resource" for learning, but it is not entirely clear what it is a resource for, and for whom. It becomes even harder to explain why the students who are contributing the most to the linguistic and cultural variety within our classroom landscapes are the ones whose learning does not seem to benefit from such diversification.

Ethnic minority students, and especially immigrant newcomers, who arrive at our schools virtually bursting with cultural diversity, are consistently at a higher risk of academic failure compared to "regular" American students. According to Moss and Puma (1995), ELLs are significantly more likely than American-born children to repeat a grade, less likely to be graded "excellent" in reading and math, and are often assigned to grade levels at least two years below age-grade norms. Moreover, in regard to overall academic ability and performance, teachers tend to rate ELL students lower than the non-ELL population.

A Resource for Learning

One of the major reasons why minority students in general, and immigrant newcomers in particular, perform poorly in schools is that their home cultures, while being "celebrated," are not sufficiently utilized as the resource for their own learning. That children's home culture is indispensable to learning has been argued theoretically by Vygotsky (1978) and his followers, and confirmed through ethnographic studies. It is the culture of the child's home—not the cultures of others—that enables and supports cognitive development through the complex system of social and cognitive factors: norms, beliefs, values, behaviors, socialization practices (Rogoff, 2003) as well as psychological "tools of the mind," such as selective attention and memory strategies (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Children acquire these tools in the process of interaction with members of their communities and participation in activities within these communities. Our human capacity for learning is a function of biology, but what we learn, why, how, and from whom, is culturally determined. Systematic observations of children of various cultural groups in their classrooms and communities (Au, 1980; Delpit, 1996; Gibson, 1982; Philips, 1983) invariably demonstrate that children perform better academically if the culture of their classrooms, including expectations of appropriate behavior and instructional strategies, reflect the culture of their homes.

The very maintenance of home culture, even if not actively supported by the school, has a positive effect on school performance, as shown by Deyhle (1992) in her study of Navajo youths. Gibson (1997) observes that minority youths "do better at school when they feel strongly anchored in the

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The Role of Cultural Factors in the Acquisiton of Literacy by Iraqi Refugee Students with Interrupted Formal Education

Barbara Nykiel-Herbert

identities of their families, communities, and peers, and when they feel supported in pursuing a strategy of selective or additive acculturation" (p. 431).

Young people tend to gravitate towards members of their ethnic/cultural groups even in schools which make deliberate, concerted efforts to promote and affirm diversity in all their curricular and social activities (Wagner, 1998). On the other hand, as the psychologist Erik Erikson concluded while observing the Lakota adolescents forced to Americanize at boarding schools, pressure to assimilate to the culture of the majority produces disoriented individuals headed for an identity crisis (Erikson, 1950).

Culturally Relevant

Thus, to learn productively and experience academic success, students need access to curricula and instructional approaches that are "culturally relevant" (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and "culturally responsive" (Gay, 2000). Culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy uses "cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" and thus "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.18). Gay includes "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles" as factors crucial to effective learning (2000, p. 29).

The traditional curricula and instructional approaches in American public schools are, by default, culturally relevant for middle-class, (predominantly) White, (predominantly) Anglo-American students; students of this category experience the highest rate of academic success because, celebrations of diversity notwithstanding, the culture of our public schools is essentially homogeneous, and congruent with the culture of White middle-class American homes. To make our schools truly multicultural—that is, ensure "that students from diverse racial, ethnic and social groups will experience educational equality" (Banks, 2004, p. 3)—culturally responsive pedagogy must be offered consistently to ELL newcomers, particularly those who are educationally at-risk from the start: refugees from conflict zones, children displaced by natural disasters, and all those with interrupted education, or no previous school experience.

This article examines the impact of culturally-relevant instruction on the academic performance of ELLs with interrupted education. The data collected in a 10-month long intervention program for non-literate refugee students from Iraq confirm that immersion in a learning environment congruent with the home culture can significantly improve the students' learning outcomes. Although content learning was also positively affected, this article focuses on the students' acquisition of literacy, since it was their lack of English literacy skills that identified them as at-risk for academic failure.

The Background of the Study

The subjects of the study are 12 refugee children from Iraq in grades 3 through 5 (ages 8 through 11) in an Upstate New York urban school, referred to in this article as Edison Elementary. Edison's population comprised about 650 students from all racial backgrounds: Caucasian, African American, Latino, and Asian, mostly low income families; over 80% received free or reduced lunches (the numbers fluctuated slightly from year to year.) The city where Edison Elementary is located was designated in the 1980s as a refugee resettlement area, into which the World Relief Organization was relocating war-zone refugees.

In the early 1990s, with numbers of ELLs entering the District nearly exploding, Edison Elementary volunteered to house a cluster ESL program, which would provide ESL services to ELLs from several of the District's elementary schools. The ESL population at Edison, which vacillated somewhere between 80 and 100 in a given school year, consisted mostly of South-East Asian, Eastern European, and Puerto Rican students.

Beginning in 1995, refugee families from Iraq, mostly Kurds who had fled Sad-

dam Hussein's persecution, were resettled into the Edison Elementary catchment area. The majority of the new arrivals came from non-literate rural families. (Several generations of Kurds have been deprived of opportunities to become educated due to the ongoing political conflict coupled with the Iraqi government's educational policies, which included efforts to suppress the Kurdish language and identity; Rytterager, 1993).

The children who arrived at Edison had very little schooling due to the interruptions caused by the war and displacement; some had never attended school. Since no other instructional options were available at the school at that time, the Iraqi children were assigned to age-appropriate mainstream classrooms and received ESL instruction on a pullout basis, for 50-60 minutes a day, in compliance with the New York State Department of Education policy.

Slower Linguistic Progress

However, as a group, the Iraqis were making considerably slower linguistic and academic progress compared to other ELLs at the school, despite receiving the same kind and amount of ESL support. After 12 to 18 months at the school, many of the Iraqi students in middle and higher grades were barely at the emergent level of literacy acquisition, scoring in the non-literate category at their respective grade levels on the Language Assessment Scales Reading/Writing (LAS R/W) test. Because of their struggles with the English language and literacy, the academic gap between them and their grade-level peers widened as time went by. As a result, about 30% of the Iraqi student population ended up with referrals to special education services, and many others were retained in the same grade.

In 1998, as an alternative to special education and retention, neither of which seemed to make a substantial difference in the students' academic performance, a one-year educational intervention program was proposed specifically for the lowest-performing Iraqi students in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades. The program was an all-day, self-contained class in which both the curriculum and the instructional strategies were carefully planned to match the Iraqi children's experiential knowledge and to conform, to the extent possible, to their cultural norms, values, beliefs, and expectations.

Since providing instruction in the children's mother tongues was not possible for practical reasons (unavailability of financial, material, and human resources), the instruction was conducted entirely in English, but the use of mother tongues (Kurdish and Arabic) for communication and cooperation with classmates was strongly encouraged. The results of the LAS R/W post-test at the end of the year showed that the students participating in the intervention had made markedly better progress in English literacy compared with the rest of the ELL population at the school, who received instruction in a traditional ESL pull-out setting. Moreover, several students in the program exceeded the literacy standards required for testing out of ESL at their grade levels.

Teacher and Program Designer

As one of the ESL teachers at Edison at the time, I was one of the designers of the program, and I also taught the self-contained class during its implementation. Four student-interns (two graduate and two undergrads) of linguistics and anthropology from a nearby State University of New York branch campus were involved as teaching assistants, while also helping to collect data. It must be emphasized that the intervention was not intended as a research opportunity for academics, but an educational opportunity for a group of left-behind children; the data, especially the audio-taping of class sessions, were collected primarily to provide input for instructional planning, to record the progress of individual students, and to document the intervention for assessment purposes.

Nevertheless, some of the ethnographic data collected in the classroom by a graduate student of anthropology in a participant-observer role were used as the basis of her doctoral dissertation (Greathouse, 2000). The data that inform this article include transcripts of taped lessons and out-of-classroom storytelling sessions with the students, photocopied samples of students' work, and observational material collected both at the school site and during visits to the students' homes.

Ten years later, the data still tell a compelling story of a group of struggling immigrant newcomers who reclaim their right to academic success. As the number of ELLs in American public schools is steadily rising, and a need for viable solutions to the issues of language, culture, and academic performance become more pressing, the story's relevance continues.

While a considerable amount of attention has been devoted to the role of language and culture in education with reference to large minority groups within American society, such as African Americans, Latinos, South-East Asians, Native Americans, and Hawaiians, relatively little has been said about specific ethnic groups of ELL newcomers , and research on academic performance of Iraqi refugees is virtually non-existent (but cf. Pipher, 2003, for her personal account of assisting Kurdish refugees outside the school context, and Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007 for a case study of a non-literate Kurdish refugee student). Case studies focusing on ELLs of particular ethnic/cultural backgrounds are valuable in that they provide specific, detailed knowledge that can help to verify and confirm, or refute, our existing ideas and beliefs about the interplay of cultural, social, linguistic, and cognitive factors in educational processes.

A good reason for specifically addressing the educational issues of Iraqi refugees is the current political situation in Iraq. Although the war in Iraq is officially over, the country is dealing with one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. According to the web site of Refugees International, a non-government organization, there are currently over 1.5 million Iraqi refugees living in desperate conditions in camps outside Iraq. While many hope to eventually return to their homes, some will need protection from politically-motivated violence through resettlement. Since the United States generally resettles about 50% of all the world's refugees each year, we should probably expect an influx of refugees from Iraq in the next several years (http://www.refugeesinternational.org, accessed Aug 1, 2009). If so, the present study will be of value to educational practitioners who, in the near future, may find themselves working with refugee students from Iraq.

A Powerful Transformation

The story that unfolds from the audio-taped dialogues and narratives, as well as the students' written work, is one about a powerful, multi-dimensional transformation brought about by a shift of cultural perspective—one that recognized the students' individual identities as well as the identity of their group. The Iraqi students, who, in the mainstream school culture, stood out by their deficits, instantly became well-informed experts within the self-contained classroom, where the shared accumulated capital of their cultural and experiential knowledge became validated as a foundation for academic learning.

Our goal for the students at the onset of the intervention was an improvement in language and literacy skills that would advance them from the Non-Literate (the lowest) to the Limited-Literate (intermediate) category on the Language Assessment Scales Reading/Writing (LAS

R/W) post-test at the end of the school year. The results, however, exceeded our expectations. Six out of 11 Iraqi students who started and completed the program, and whose pre-test and post-test scores were 12 months apart, performed at the Competent-Literate level (the highest) on the LAS R/W test at the end of the year. By comparison, out of 77 remaining ELLs at Edison who received ESL support on a pullout basis, only six achieved comparable Competent Literate scores, and all of those had advanced from the Limited-Literate level. The six Iraqi students who tested out of ESL were the only ELLs at Edison who "jumped" from the Non-Literate straight to the Competent-Literate level in one year.

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"There Is Nothing There…"

The impact of the intervention on the academic performance and the social behavior of the Iraqi students cannot be fully appreciated without a closer look at the circumstances of their arrival at Edison and their first year at the school. The Iraqi kids arrived at Edison after months, and in some cases, a couple of years, of harrowing experiences including the war, forced eviction or escape from their homes, and an exodus through the mountains, in brutal weather, to refugee camps in Turkey (Brenneman, 2007). Edison teachers, although supporting the diversity of the school, considered having beginning ELLs in a mainstream classroom a hardship; therefore, new ELL arrivals were assigned to classrooms by strict turns in the order in which they had been registered.

Consequently, children at the same grade level who arrived at the school at the same time, often cousins and playmates from the same village, who had shared the refugee resettlement experience, were placed in different homerooms. Teachers also believed that separating the students who shared the same language would prevent them from socializing with one another, and instead force them to interact with American students and thus learn English faster, which, unfortunately, did not happen.

Except for the daily hour of English instruction, the Iraqi students spent their time in the mainstream classrooms where they could not participate in what their classes were doing because they lacked the basic frame of reference of Western school knowledge, which we take for granted with American children in middle elementary grades. For example, some children in the Iraqi group had traveled half-way around the world (from Iraq to Turkey, from Turkey to Guam, and from Guam to New York), yet had no concept of the Earth as a planet, had never heard about the continents, and did not realize that Guam was an island; they had never seen a map or a globe. Their world views and beliefs were strongly influenced by the lore of their native country ("One woman in Iraq, her parents made her marry to a bear. It's true, I swear, my grandmother told me," Mercam, a 5th grader, insisted.)

Given Busy Work

Since they could not do grade-level work, they were given below-the-grade-level busy work: labeling pictures; identifying the letters of the alphabet; learning numbers; cutting and pasting; copying simple sentences; or attempting to read low-level readers intended for American kindergarteners or first graders. They were sometimes assisted by a teacher's aide, if there was one available in a given classroom. Typically, an aide would read a line from a pre-primer reader, and the student would repeat it. Afterwards the student would be asked to copy some of the text.

Neither the teachers nor the classmates made any special efforts to interact with the Iraqi children; the teachers claimed they had no time to spend "one-on-one" with their needy charges, despite the fact that they were often observed doing paperwork at their desks while the class was engaged in seatwork, and the Iraqi students (or other ELLs, for that matter) were quietly coloring or copying meaninglessly.

Thus, even though the Iraqi students were included in the head-count of their mainstream classrooms, they were effectively excluded from the grade-level curriculum. The vast academic gaps could not be closed by ESL instruction only; the students also needed an injection of meaningful content, suited to their level of comprehension. As it was, wasting hours of precious instructional time each day, instead of catching up with their American peers, the Iraqi kids were falling further and further behind. While they had acquired some basic oral communicative skills, their apparent inability to get a grasp of reading and writing was becoming a serious concern of both mainstream and ESL teachers.

In addition to the mounting difficulties that the Iraqi children experienced in academic learning, they were subjected to discomforts stemming from cultural differences that the Edison teachers were not aware of. The different norms with regard to physical proximity between genders, dress and food preferences, religious observances, and public conduct made the Iraqi students behave in ways that were interpreted as neglectful, apathetic, or rude. Some of the parents did not support schooling for girls, and found co-educational schools particularly distressing.

Thus the children, especially the girls, were forced to navigate the conflicting norms, attitudes, and expectations of the home and the school. For example, to avoid activities in physical education classes that may have led to physical contact with boys, girls regularly "forgot" their sneakers on gym days, and were thus excluded from team games, to the frustration of the physical education teacher, who believed that these students needed to "act American."

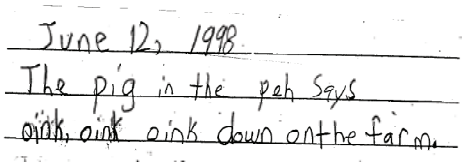
Cultural Tension

The cultural tension, which the teachers failed to fully acknowledge, was causing the Iraqi students distress in academic learning as well. The content of some of the literacy materials that teachers used for the Iraqi children was not only below the students' developmental level, but also culturally inappropriate. Two examples should suffice to illustrate this point. One third-grade teacher complained that a Kurdish girl in her classroom, Nigar, appeared stubborn and contrary. According to the teacher, Nigar repeatedly refused to read an easy children's picture book that had been selected for her. She would read the first few pages, and then would suddenly close the book and sit in silence.

Assuming at first that Nigar was embarrassed by her poor reading, the teacher tried to help her re-read the same book for several days in a row, with the same result. As it turned out, the story depicted a scene of a little girl washing her pet dog in the family bathtub. As a Muslim, Nigar knew that dogs were unclean and were not supposed to be touched and let inside the house, let alone allowed to use personal hygiene facilities intended for people. Nigar felt uncomfortable looking at the book, but the cultural norm of respecting and obeying adults, and teachers in particular, prevented her from an overt refusal. Her English language skills were insufficient at that point to explain to the teacher why she could not read the book.

The only choice that remained for her was passive non-compliance.

Beyar, a 3rd grader with an extremely active mind, was also getting into a lot of trouble with his teacher. A highly intelligent child with lots to say, Beyar was frustrated with his inability to participate in what his class was doing, because he could not express his thoughts satisfactorily in English. Instead of modeling the language for him so that he could express himself better, the teacher gave him reading and writing assignments that were at his "level." A book about farm animals, a page of which Beyar was asked to copy and re-read to the teacher, was appropriate for a 4-to-5-year-old American child, but not for a 9-year-old Muslim child:


June 12, 1998
The pig in the pen says
oink, oink oink down on the farm.

Nigar chose not to comply with the teacher's request by passive, silent refusal, accepting the consequences of her attitude. Beyar did what the teacher required of him, but his anxiety, frustration, and boredom manifested themselves in boisterous behavior that labeled him as a troublemaker. Later, when his language skills improved, he confessed that he felt "like a stupid boy," and worried about disappointing his family.

The growing collective frustration of the Edison teachers cumulated in a suspicion that something was inherently wrong with Iraqi children, the majority of whom were Kurdish, and speculations (never corroborated) emerged that the students as infants, or their pregnant mothers, were victims of nerve gas attacks against the Kurds by the Saddam Hussein regime, which could perhaps explain their learning difficulties. Referrals of ELL students to special education services increased; in 1997, nine out of 26 Iraqi students were referred to special education after one year at the school.

The teachers' helplessness can be illustrated by the comment made about Shukriya, a 3rd grader: "I've done my best, but there is nothing there. I'm gonna have to refer her to special ed." However, underneath the tone of resignation, there is a detectable message of cultural bias: "There is nothing in this child that I, a White middle-class American teacher, find worthwhile to uncover and work with to satisfy my institution's expectations."

It Takes a Village

The idea of creating a self-contained, all-day ESL classroom for the failing Iraqi students was suggested as an alternative to excessive special-education referrals. The program would focus on language and literacy of middle and higher elementary grades while exploring the mainstream curricular content in science, social studies, and mathematics, adapted to the level of the students' comprehension. That meant modifying the instruction to match both the level of the students' English and, to the extent possible, their experiential knowledge—while at the same time acknowledging and respecting their culture.

Only students in grades 3 through 5 who had scored in the non-literate category on the end-of-the-year LAS R/W test would qualify; the students who met adequate progress expectations (that is, who had advanced to the Limited Competent category) were to continue with pull-out ESL classes. It is important to emphasize that most, but definitely not all, Iraqi newcomers at Edison did poorly academically. As one can guess, the ones who performed better had received more schooling prior to their arrival in the U.S., and had parents or older siblings with more formal education. The program was planned as a one-year "booster" intervention, after which the students would return to their appropriate grade-level classrooms and continue to receive ESL support as needed.

A Separate Classroom

The proposal to create a separate, self-contained classroom for the low-performing Iraqi students was initially a hard sell to the Edison community, with reactions ranging from doubt to outright criticism. Back in 1998, putting students in a separate class because of their ethnic, cultural, or academic differences was controversial, to say the least. This was the time when the policies of inclusion and mainstreaming were gaining traction in American public schools; students with learning disabilities and other cognitive or emotional exceptionalities, who had in previous years been educated in separate classrooms, were now being integrated into the mainstream. Push-in strategies, which place services for students with special learning needs, including ELLs, right inside mainstream classrooms, began to replace pull-out programs.

Predictably, a "segregationist" concern was raised: the notion of separating the Iraqi children into their own group may have been too reminiscent of the racist education policies of the past, when "separate" meant "inferior." Putting low-performing students into one class also smacked rather uncomfortably of tracking. A worry was also voiced that such separation would deprive the Iraqi students of linguistic, social, and cultural benefits of daily interaction with their American peers, and thus slow down their English language acquisition and academic progress.

Educational equality is a notoriously tricky concept since "equal" does not necessarily mean fair. Even though they were physically included into mainstream classrooms, the Iraqi children were de facto segregated: alienated both from the members of their cultural group and from their American peers, and subjected to what Geneva Gay calls a "segregated curriculum" (Gay 1990)—the learning environment, materials, and instructional styles inferior to what was offered to their classmates. No "regular" third- or fourth-grader was expected to read and copy kindergarten-level books, or cut and paste matching pictures of objects and their names.

Segregation occurs when certain groups of students are put in inferior learning environments that receive less overall funding and less- qualified teachers, and where expectations of student achievement are low. By contrast, the program created for the Iraqi students received additional funding from the District (to relieve the teacher from her ELL student load of 50 so that she could teach full-time the 15 students who qualified for the intervention), was taught by a teacher with a Ph.D. and three teaching certifications, assisted by four interns (two with master's degrees), all of whom had high expectations of the Iraqi students' academic performance. Neither were the Iraqi students completely separated from their American peers; they attended "specials" (art, music, and physical education classes) with students from mainstream classrooms.

However, although current research on the impact of cross-cultural socialization on students' academic achievement is at best inconclusive, my belief, based on my observations and experiences, is that ELLs' casual contacts with their American peers do not significantly affect their academic performance, although they may help improve their spoken English fluency and increase basic communicative vocabulary. ELLs also seem to gravitate socially towards other ELLs, even if they are from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. It is nonetheless worth stressing that the perceived "ethnic segregation" of the Iraqi students in the self-contained classroom was hardly intentional; it just so happened that

Edison's ELLs most in need of an educational intervention all came from the same country. However, the group's cultural homogeneity turned out to be one of the strongest defining features of the program, and one of its most significant assets.

Thus, as cultural outsiders, the teachers needed to take cues from the children to help create an environment that was culturally comfortable and conducive to productive learning.

Hybrid Classroom Cultures

Even though cultural relevance of the curriculum and sensitivity to cultural differences were considered central to the program from the onset of the intervention, our initial ideas of how culture would be incorporated into the program were, to put it generously, less than precise. There was definitely no intention of creating a Middle Eastern classroom; that was neither possible nor desirable. As Au explains, the effectiveness of culturally responsive instruction depends not on duplicating home and community settings in the classroom but rather, on "creative combining of elements from the students' home cultures with elements typical of the classroom and academic learning" (2006, p. 116).

Nieto (1999) believes that all living cultures are hybrid by nature, while Shannon (1995) argues that hybrid classroom cultures should be deliberately engineered so that at-risk students can be socialized into roles, values, attitudes and expectations that would enable them to succeed. At Edison, we expected that the culture of the self-contained classroom would naturally shape itself differently than the cultures of regular mainstream classrooms at Edison. The teachers in the self-contained classroom (my four interns and myself) had experiences of other cultures and spoke other languages besides English, but none of us had more than perfunctory knowledge of the Middle East.

Thus, as cultural outsiders, the teachers needed to take cues from the children to help create an environment that was culturally comfortable and conducive to productive learning. In practice, this entailed allowing the students to contribute substantially to decisions on important issues ranging from the organization of classroom space to curricular and instructional choices regarding topics, materials, and projects.

The Resulting Classroom

In broad terms, the culture that emerged in the self-contained class shared the general framework of norms, values, and expectations relating to education with the culture of the school in which it was embedded. However, it also differed from the mainstream school culture along several important dimensions. First, as already mentioned, while Edison classrooms were ethnically and culturally diverse, our class was culturally highly homogenous. All except two students in the class came from Iraq (one exception was a student from Jordan, and the other—a late addition to the program—a refugee from Bosnia). All of the students were Muslim and therefore, even if they did not speak the same mother tongue, they shared the same worldview, adhered to the same principles of conduct, and celebrated the same holidays.

Second, while the "regular" classrooms at Edison, like typical American public school classrooms, grouped students of the same chronological age, ours was a multi-age class, with children between the ages of 8 and 11, including five sets of siblings. It is highly unusual in American schools for siblings to be placed in the same class, and even twins are typically separated into different homerooms. The practices of grouping students for instruction according to the date of birth, and separating siblings follow from certain culturally-based assumptions prevalent in Western education: that schooling is an individualistic, competitive process aimed to produce competitive individuals.

Our classroom population was also atypical in that 12 out of 15 students came from the same public housing complex called Creekside Heights, into which the refugees had been resettled. The Heights had the appearance and feel of a small village with townhouse-like duplexes, front lawns, backyards, and a playground. The students thus were not only together during school hours, but also spent time together at home. All of the above factors: the students' shared ethnicity, immigrant/refugee status, language, and religion, combined with their home life circumstances created very different dynamics from those at work in the regular classrooms at Edison.

In the countries of the Middle East, children typically go to single-gender schools; the co-educational setup of American schools was one of the major points of discomfort for the Iraqi parents as well as the pre-pubescent and adolescent girls in the schools throughout the District. To make the children comfortable in their new classroom on the first day of school, we asked them to choose their own seats. They immediately divided the classroom into the boys' side and the girls' side, arranging the desks in two rows with a wide passage in the middle. The children would cross the path into the opposite gender's area during the day, primarily to borrow or trade supplies, but never for a chat or help, or to work together.

Differences by Gender

There was minimal, if any at all, change in the boys' seating arrangements during the year. On the girls' side, however, the seating arrangements were in perpetual motion, as they "visited" at each other's desks constantly, seeking or offering help, or just for company. The children's social behavior in the classroom mirrored their behavior at home and in their community. In the Middle Eastern cultures, and particularly in the rural culture of the Kurds, one does not need an invitation to visit a neighbor's home (Edgecomb, 2008). Thus the children, particularly the Kurdish girls, went in and out of each other's homes freely. The presence of someone else's children in a home was unobtrusive; they just merged with the family members as they participated in the domestic activities and chores, attending to babies, helping in the kitchen, or serving food. Visiting at one another's desk, helping one another finish "chores," and watching out for one's own and one another's younger siblings was part and parcel of these children's socialization within their native culture (Rytterager, 1993).

The cooperation and help in our classroom often manifested itself as copying from a classmate, or doing part of the work for someone else, usually a younger child. These practices are frowned upon by American teachers as an indication of dishonesty or laziness, or because teachers believe that students engaging in such "collaboration" are not learning what they should; ELLs are not an exception to this perception (Toohey, 1998).

In our class, copying, or finishing someone else's work meant that schoolwork had an intrinsic value, and its proper completion was a source of pride. In American classrooms, students are encouraged to do—and to be satisfied with—their "personal best;" by contrast, the Iraqi children strived for the standards achieved by the most advanced among them. In our class, these standards were set by the perfor-

mance of two fifth grade girls, Mercam and Zerin, who became "go to" authorities for the rest of the class.

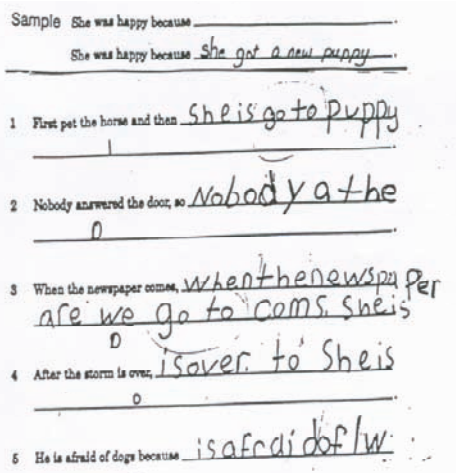
Allowing to copy, prompting answers, or doing some of the others' work for them was regarded by the older students as taking care of the younger children, reflecting their roles and responsibilities at home and in the community, where their maturity is relied upon at a much younger age compared to American children. (The two 5th grade girls in our class, both aged 11, were no longer considered children by their families; Mercam was already betrothed to be married to a young man who, at that time, was still living in Iraq.)

Storytelling

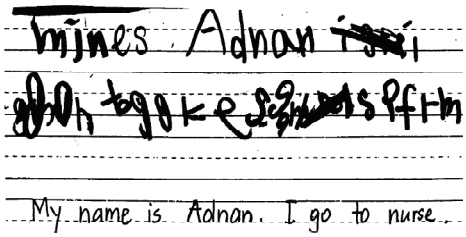
Bridging the Oral and the Written Modes

The leading goal of the intervention was to get the Iraqi students to acquire sufficient English language and literacy skills to enable them to function productively in their respective grade-level classes the following year, after the program ended. The initial phase of learning to read and write appeared enormously challenging for the Iraqi children, particularly to those who had never attended school. The challenges ranged from linguistic to conceptual and pragmatic. The two writing samples below illustrate the level of literacy performance with which the children entered the program.

Sample A


Sample She was happy because _____.
She was happy because she got a new puppy.
1 First pet the horse and then She is go to Puppy
2 Nobody answered the door, so Nobody a the
3 When the newspaper comes, when the newspaper are we go to coms. She is
4 After the storm is over, i Sover to She is
5 He is afraid of dogs because isafradi of lw

Sample B


mjnes Adnan
My name is Adnan. I go to nurse.

Sample A is produced by Shukriya, a 9-year old 3rd grader after she had been at Edison for about 15 months. Sample B belongs to Adnan, a 10-year-old 4th grader after six months at the school. It is worth noting that each student has a different understanding of what writing is, and responds accordingly. For Shukriya, writing means copying, as neatly as possible, strings of words from print sources at hand; her understanding of writing is undoubtedly the result of the meaningless busy work she was given to keep her occupied in her mainstream classroom. Shkriya has learned to form letters and copy them in neat strings, but she cannot read what she has written.

Unlike Shukriya, Adnan has never mastered penmanship, but he understands that writing represents speech, and that letters stand for sounds. Both students' hypotheses about writing and their corresponding written products are typical of emergent writers who are acquiring literacy in their mother tongue; however, children immersed in a literate mother-tongue environment tend to acquire these concepts and skills around the ages of four to six; the two students showcased above are thus about 3-to-4 years behind average American schoolchildren.

Finding suitable reading material for the Iraqi students was initially somewhat of a challenge. Among the stacks of easy picture books available for emergent and beginning readers, few were engaging enough for eight to 11 year-old Middle Eastern children, whose socio-emotional development was well ahead of their academic and linguistic (in English) level. Reading should bring some intellectual and/or emotional rewards to the reader; if it doesn't, then it becomes a pointless exercise. How many English speakers would like to be put through the pain of learning to read Arabic only to discover that the content had nothing to do with their experiences or interests, and had no application to their lives?

Thus the initial literacy instruction was based primarily on the experiential narrative material generated by the students themselves, with the scant available resources strategically incorporated into the process (as the children's skills developed, increasingly more published print resources were used). Experience-based stories are necessarily embedded in cultural knowledge since the choices of topics (what is appropriate for telling about, to whom, and under what circumstances), the perspectives on these topics, and the narrative patterns themselves are all culturally-determined.

Students' Stories

I use the term "story" for verbal material of any genre and/or mode generated by the students, including both fiction and non-fiction narratives. Some of the storytelling sessions in the classrooms were audio-taped so that the stories could be used for other learning tasks. Additionally, one of the interns, called "Mr. Matthew" by the class, regularly met with the students in pairs or small groups outside the classroom for storytelling sessions, which were also recorded on audiotape.

The recorded stories were transcribed, edited (but with an effort to preserve the authors' language and story sequence as much as possible), typed, and given back to the students to read, as the examples below show:

> A. I lived in Iraq. There were no trees. It was a city. I walked to school, like from here to the Heights. In the summer, my mother, father, sister and I slept out on the roof. (Adnan)

> B. One day my mom was cooking and I was jumping around her. She was using oil for cooking eggs. And the oil splashed out on my head. My mom took me to the hospital and they had to cut off my hair. (Alham)

> C. During the war, my mom would tell us to pray. Sometimes the soldiers would come and we would bury the guns in the dirt. At night time, the sky looked like fireworks. I liked how bright it was and we would go outside to play, but it was scary because if it hit you, you would die. (Mercam)

We made sure that the children knew and understood the steps of this process:

> *Teacher*: Now, where did this story come from? Did Beyar write it?
>
> *Nigar*: No, no. Beyar say it and then Mr. Matthew write it and then he type it on the computer and then, and then we get this.
>
> *Teacher*: OK, so the story that we have here was not what Beyar wrote, it's a story that Beyar…
>
> *Aram*: …said!
>
> *Teacher*: That's right. Beyer told this story to Mr. Matthew, and Mr. Matthew wrote it down.

Oral Traditions

Middle Eastern cultures emphasize the "living word," the oral traditions being particularly important for the Kurds, among whom the literacy rates are low. The oral language skills are highly valued: the ability to quip, joke, tell a good story, and generally express oneself skillfully and

cleverly are considered social assets in the Kurdish culture (Allison, 1996; Meho & Maglaughlin, 2001; Rytterager 1993).

Having one's story typed and read in class quickly became an ambition to aspire to, giving rise to all sorts of competitive tactics as the students vied for attention as storytellers. One of the strategies was to write one's story at home and then rehearse telling it, preferably until it was memorized. The practice was initiated by Shukriya and Aram, a sister and brother, who were among the least confident students in the class. Shukriya and Aram had a fear of "messing up" in front of their audience of discriminating peers, or in front of the audio-recorder, and that's why they resorted to pre-writing and rehearsing their stories. Shukriya and Aram came from an illiterate rural family and so it is not likely that writing down an anticipated speech was something they had learned at home, or in the community. It appears that the children discovered by themselves that writing could help them improve their public oral performance. Originally, pre-written stories served as a sort of cheat-sheets, and were not intended to be shared with others or evaluated by the teacher.

A. *Shukriya's pre-written story, verbatim:*

When I was in Iroq I was little gril and I was in halpie [hospital] for three days. An my gormery [grandmother] was what [with] me for three days.

When I was and Iroq my mom was in a farmy [farm; meaning: working in the field] and I cook and I heple my Gormery. To calet [clean] up like flemry [floor] and kcinen [kitchen] and like outsidey.

B. *Aram's pre-written story, verbatim:*

When I was in Irav [Iraq] I was in school. My mama get a baby in Irav in [and] his mame is Karwan. In Irav my mama sert [sister] get hit buy bus. My neigabro [neighbor] was saw [so] mena [mean] to as [us] and we can not go Irav because they din't let as go out in [and] out.

My gorm [grandma] is die in Irav. My mam is very sat [sad] because shes miss her family. My mom is very sat she can not help us because she is very sat. My dad work in Irav they don't give my dads anytime.

Western Written Tradition

In the Western literate cultures, writing is generally considered superior to talk, and writing skills are more highly valued than oral skills. Thus, in American classrooms, talk (brainstorming, planning) is often used as preparation for writing. The rural Kurdish children had little prior experience of literacy, but valued skilled oral performance; they discovered that writing can be a convenient tool to help them improve their storytelling. It was only after the "cheat-sheets" were accidentally revealed, and applauded by the teacher, that the mad "writing rush" began, and our oral storytelling sessions expanded to include story-reading.

Middle Eastern cultures emphasize the "living word," the oral traditions being particularly important for the Kurds . . . Having one's story typed and read in class became an ambition to aspire to . . .

The children's stories, the majority of which were set in Iraq, contained details that we, the teachers, either did not quite understand given our limited knowledge of the Iraqi lifestyles, or were simply curious about. In such cases, the students were asked for explanation or elaboration, which invariably led to animated discussions, providing us with exciting glimpses of the Iraqi culture, and offering excellent starting points for other activities, often leading to more stories.

Teacher: Beyar, tell me about sleeping on the roof that you mention in your story. People don't do that here in America. Was it safe to sleep on the roof?

Beyar: Yeah, it wasn't like the roof here in America. The roof in Iraq is like… it's not so high.

Teacher: What if you fall off?

Mercam: No, no, you don't fall. It's like… I make you a picture.

Nigar: Yeah, in the summer, we all sleeped out, it was good, it was cool and everything.

Adnan: Because it's too hot in the house.

Mercam: We would make tents and everything.

Teacher: But once you said that during the war the missiles hit some of the homes in your neighborhood. You said the soldiers were shooting weapons and they looked like fireworks in the sky. Did you sleep on the roof then?

Mercam: Oh, when the war…. When the weapons were there it was not summer, it was…

Teacher: Winter?

Mercam: Winter, yeah. We always sleep inside in the winter because it's cold.
Shkriya: We… my brother Karwan went to the roof one day and it fired … he fired it.

Teacher: He fired it? He fired the roof? You mean, he set it on fire?

Shukriya: Yeah.

Teacher: Did it burn down? The roof? The house?

Shukriya: Yeah.

Teacher: Oh my goodness. Will you tell us that story tomorrow, since we're running out of time now?

Shukriya: Yeah.

Shukriya, the student diagnosed with "nothing in there" at the end of the previous school year, pre-wrote her story at home that evening and delivered it in class the following day, showing herself off as a competent narrator.

GOING UP TO THE ROOF

One day I was going to my Gamidam's house. She was going to her garden. I talked her may I come with you. She talked me to go ask your mother. Then I went to talk my mom, My mom said yes you may go with your Gamidam.

When me and Gamidam went to the gardan. We start picging some vagtble's.

Then we went to home. From the gardan I saw karwan in the roof. I went to talk my mom that Karwan is firing the roof. But my mother did not believy me. I talked her to comeand look. When she came to look she beivled me.

We start to get the stavs out in the house. Because it was firit.

Then my Dad build a noter [another] house for use [us] and a gardan.

Shukriya presents an eyewitness account of a significant event in her family's history. Her narrative is perfectly sequenced with no digressions or backtracking. The long preamble to the story serves to establish Shukriya's credibility, which apparently had been challenged by her own mother at the time of the incident. Both her mother, who had given her permission to go over to her grandmother's place, and her grandmother could confirm her whereabouts. Grandmother could corroborate Shukriya's assertion that, from where she was standing, she could see her brother on the roof playing with fire. Shukriya does not speculate about how

her little brother ended up on the roof with live fire (matches? a burning stick from the kitchen stove?) even though the boy must have been thoroughly questioned afterwards by the family members in an attempt to reconstruct the events. Shukriya's story is about her own experience and role in the outcome of the incident.

Learning Text Organization

While their own culturally-appropriate narrative modes were encouraged and appreciated in our classroom, the students also needed to learn the basic principles of text organization and classification required by the curricula of mid- and higher-elementary grades, such as elements of story grammar as well as the characteristic features of literary kinds and of some common genres. To ensure that both the traditional oral patterns familiar to the students and the literary patterns preferred by the school curriculum were respected and valued, we repeatedly emphasized the differences in the standards for speaking and for writing, as the transcript below exemplifies:

Teacher: Now tell me, what is the setting of the story? Where does the story happen? Where was Beyar when his nose got broken?

Nazdar: The setting is in Iraq. Did he get his nose broken in the garden..?

Group: No! Yeah… yes. No.

Aram: We don't know.

Teacher: Then read the beginning of the story again. It says, My first year here, I was on a team." What do you think the word 'here' means?

Aram: The United States?

Awdar: New York?

Teacher: Aha! So the soccer game in which Beyar's nose got broken took place after he came to the US, right? But in his story he also talks about...

Mercam: His home in Iraq.

Nazdar: His garden.

Aram: Fruit!

Teacher: You're right. I want you to take a pencil and underlie all the sentences that do not have anything to do with the story of soccer and the broken nose.

Awdar: Because he say a story about soccer, and this part is about garden. It doesn't go in the soccer story.

Shukriya: This part, this one is enough for the story, but this right here… (Shkriya points with her finger) Beyar did more … this was about like, garden and things …"

Teacher: This whole part…what do we call this unit of writing?

Beyar: Paragraph!

Shukriya: Paragraph. This whole paragraph…it's not good for the story. We don't need it.

Teacher: So what are we going to do with it?

Mercam: Take it out.

Beyar: But when we get in the ending, when my nose gets fixed, we should put a little of this… of this sentence, like this, in the end, but not like a solution.

Teacher: OK, very good, not like a solution, but more like background.

Beyar: Yeah.

Teacher: Or maybe more like an introduction. Introduction is a beginning of a story.

Awdar: The second part that is good for soccer we can put that in the first place and the other one second.

Teacher: Excellent. Very good idea. Very good thinking. You can use that information as an introduction to the story. This is Beyar's telling us about his interest in soccer. I want everyone to look at the story again and cross out the parts that you are not going to use, that you don't need. I'll tell you something. Good writers cross out a lot. You are a better writer if you get rid of a lot of stuff that you don't need.

Aram: What do you mean?

Teacher: Sometimes you write a lot, and then you read it and say, I don't need this, I don't need that. So you take it out. You delete it. So cross out—delete—all the sentences that you are not going to need. Now, Awdar said something very important and I hope people listened and are now going to tell me how you are going to use the two important sentences from the second paragraph in the story. Yes, Shukriya.

Shukriya: I think Awdar said that he can use these sentences in another story. He can talk about a garden.

Teacher: OK, that's the part that can go in another story. But the sentences in the second paragraph that talk about soccer? How are we going to use them in this story?

Zerin: We're gonna use that part to the first part.

Teacher: Yes, we're gonna move them to the first paragraph. Are we going to put it in the middle, the beginning or at the end of the first paragraph?

Group: At the end. At the end.

Nazdar: No, at the beginning.

Teacher: We're gonna put it at the beginning to make a nice ...

Aram: …sentence!

Teacher: … in-tro-duc-tion. We're going to put this information in the introduction. To have a good beginning for the story. Now, I want you to get some paper and re-write Beyar's story. One more thing that I want to ask you before you begin: Who is the narrator in this story?

Group: Beyar. Beyar.

Teacher: Right. He is both the character and the narrator. When you write your story, you can be the narrator. You can write about Beyar. So, instead of saying "I", what are you going to write?

Aram: Beyar.

Awdar: And the title?

Teacher: Yes, think about the title. The title can come last.

Mercam: I know the title.

Aram: Me too.

Teacher: By the way, you don't need to use Beyar's sentences. You can re-write the story with your own sentences.

Aram: Can I use "One day?"

Teacher: You can use "One day," but you are still going to think about a good introduction, right?

Aram: Yes. Can I put my name as Beyar?

Teacher: You mean, pretend that you are Beyar? I guess you can.

The Familiar Stimulates

The transcript also shows how interaction with familiar content stimulates students' engagement in the discussion and promotes acquisition of new concepts. The whole story-making process is transparent: a story is told, recorded, typed, then revised. The students are also aware that a well-written (or told) story contains the important elements of story grammar: characters, setting, plot, problem, resolution. They clearly understand why and how an oral story needs to be revised so that it conforms to the written standards.

Since they have generated the material, they have no difficulty navigating the content, and are not shy about suggesting changes. During the discussion, the content-specific terminology that had been used before (such as setting, character, paragraph, narrator in the above transcript) is reinforced, and new relevant terminology (words such as delete and introduction) is added to the students' verbal repertoires.

Uncovering the Invisible

Anthropologists informally define culture as the knowledge that allows native participants to go competently about their daily lives. Cultural knowledge falls into two categories: overt and covert (Hall, 1959). Members of a cultural group are well aware of the overt aspects of their culture, such as language, dress, food, art, or religious ceremonies, as well as how these differ from the cultures of other groups with which they may have had contact.

The covert side of cultural knowledge—such as values, beliefs, and attitudes; social and gender roles; patterns of linguistic interaction and non-linguistic behavior; socialization practices, etc.—is typically subconscious, like a grammar of a native tongue: we know perfectly well how to use it, but we may not be able to explain the rules. This hidden knowledge may become apparent in situations of cross-cultural encounters, when other people's strange ways may inspire a reflection on our own.

Sharing their stories with cultural outsiders enabled the students to make discoveries about some of the covert aspects of their native culture, as well as the culture of their hosts. One of the academically most important discoveries was the realization that narratives are regulated by culture-specific norms. In the story below, Mercam, inspired by a children's book read in class, attempts to relate a playtime accident from her childhood:

> One day I was sitting by the door. My grandfather was very sick. Sometime later he throwed up. At that time he fell down on the floor. The doctor came to our house. They said he is dead. Everybody was crying. My cousin Kahim came to our house. Me and Kahim were playing in our porch. Kahim ran after me with a stick. He hit me on my foot. My mother put some medicine on my foot. It was better.

Mercam's story is in some aspects similar to Shukriya's story; both reference dramatic events in the lives of their families, in which the authors participate as eyewitnesses and narrators. Both stories were presented to the class within the same week, and so the evaluation standards of the peer audience are not likely to have changed significantly between the two storytelling events. Mercam's control of the language mechanics is superior to Shukriya's; Mercam's sentences are well-formed with only minor lexical errors (such as "throwed" for "threw"). By comparison, Shukriya struggles with vocabulary, confusing the usage of tell, talk, and say, as well as fire and burn. Each narrative is scrutinized by the audience for its relative strengths and weaknesses:

Narrative A.

Teacher: Now, what do we like about Mercam's story?

Aram: I like the sentences, they are big. She was going on and on, she didn't stop.

Teacher: You say that Mercam uses long sentences?

Beyar: Yeah. Like some people, they write like three words, they don't give information … they put little in a sentence, they just put a period.

Teacher: And you prefer long sentences.

Beyar: Yeah.

Narrative B.

Teacher: So, any comments on Shkriya's story?

Nazdar: She must say, "I went to tell my mom, not talk my mom."

Mercam: We went home, not we went to home.

However, while the content of Shukriya's story is accepted, the critics are not at all pleased with the content of Mercam's:

Aram: She said about grandpa threw up and he fell and she didn't write nothing what about it.

Teacher: OK, Mercam didn't write a lot about it.

Aram: She wrote about herself! We need more details.

Teacher: We need more details about what?

Aram: About what happened when grandpa died, what happened to grandma, who called the doctor.

Teacher: OK, let's talk about this. What happens in your country when somebody dies?

Awdar: They put him in a casket.

Beyar: And they make a hole in the ground…

Awdar: And they put the casket in.

Beyar: The undertaker comes.

Teacher: Oh, you know this word?

Beyar: Yes, because I watch wrestling.

Selwer: People cry.

Teacher: So Mercam says that Grandpa died, everybody came and cried, but you say the story is not right? Why not?

Shukriya: Because she said about a boy… the cousin. About… he threw a stick.

Teacher: But that's what happened. Her cousin threw a stick at her. Mercam is telling the truth.

Beyar: But that's not about grandpa.

Teacher: That detail should not be in a story about grandpa's dying, is that what you mean?

Group: Yeah. Yes.

Mercam: But I was a little girl, I didn't know.

Teacher: So what should Mercam do with her story? Which part must she change? What do you think, Mercam?

Selwer: I think she must change all the words what happened after Grandpa died. She must take out all that stuff about her cousin.

Teacher: Will that make Mercam's story better?

Aram: Yeah, if she write more details about grandpa.

Teacher: OK, I take your word for it. But then what about the piece about Mercam and her cousin playing with a stick? This is what she wanted to write about in the first place.

Mercam: I can make two different stories.

Despite their appreciation of Mercam's style (what Beyar refers to as "big sentences," by which he most likely means the story's easy flow), the students do not accept the content of Mercam's story because it does not conform to the cultural blueprint of narratives recounting a relative's death. It is clear that the children know the right way to tell about the death of a grandfather: grandmother has to be been taken care of; funeral arrangements have to be made, etc. Mercam originally intended to use her grandfather's death and funeral only as a lead to her own story—perhaps to explain why her cousin Kahim came to her family's house, and why their rough play was left unsupervised—in a manner parallel to Shukriya's detailed preamble to the actual event of the house burning down.

However, while Shukriya's story stays focused on the event that had important consequences for the family, including an epilogue (the building of a new house), Mercam uses the important family event for the purpose of telling her own inconsequential anecdote. The group was adamant that grandfather's death could not be treated as the background to a self-centered narrative ("She wrote about herself!"). Shukriya puts herself in the story as a witness to the main event; Mercam uses the main event as a background to the story about herself. The first is acceptable; the second is not.

Mercam's defense, "I was a little girl, I didn't know," refers not to the way she wrote

about the event, but to her actual behavior at the time, which only her very young age and ignorance could excuse; she was only retelling what was stored in the memory of a young child. Her peers' criticism made her realize that a young child's unexamined perspective on the family's milestone event was not appropriate in her account; she needed to approach the topic as a mature member of her cultural group that she was now. Mercam solves the problem by offering to re-write her story as two different narratives: one about her grandfather's death, and the other about roughhousing with her cousin, in which no reference to her grandfather's death would be made.

Narrative Patterns

The group's acceptance of Shukriya's story, but not Mercam's, shows the students' knowledge of narrative patterns that they had acquired in the process of language socialization within their speech communities (Heath, 1986), but of which they were most likely unaware of until the invisible rule was violated. Although they could not verbalize the rule, they unanimously demonstrated an expectation that not all stories are equal in their social importance, and that an account of a socially significant event such as the death of an elder requires that a teller follow a culturally-sanctioned script.

Simultaneously as the students' discoveries about their home culture grew so did their understanding and appreciation of the culture of their hosts. They were not only recognizing the cultural differences beyond the surface level, but also showed consideration for the norms and expectations of Americans. This attitude demonstrated itself clearly during our folk tale project, which involved collecting traditional stories from Iraq and writing them up for American readers. As the transcript below shows, the students used their formal knowledge of folk tale features acquired in class to select the stories that would best represent their storytelling tradition:

Teacher: Which story should we choose to write up first?

Students: Zerin's. Zerin's.

Aram: It was good. It had many events. Details.

Selwer: Kurdish names.

Aram: OK, Zerin's story... She has problem, solution...

Teacher: Yes, all these elements, the story grammar was in there.

Aram: The bird... the bird was... he had something... three times, or maybe four times.

Simultaneously as the students' discoveries about their home culture grew so did their understanding and appreciation of the culture of their hosts.

Teacher: Aha! There is a repetition in the story. We talked about repetitions before. How many times events often happen in a story?

Mercam: Three times?

Teacher: Excellent. Very often the same event is repeated three times. The same event, or a similar event, happens three times, and the third time usually provides a solution. Think of stories that are made like that, something happens three times. Stories that you've told in class, or stories that we've read.

Zainab: The story that we just read... Kassim and his shoes.

Teacher: That's not a bad example. He tries to throw out the shoes several times. What else?

Nazdar: The Magic Fish.

Teacher: Yes, that's another good example. He kept asking for different things... Yes, Adnan?

Adnan: The Girl and the Bear.

Teacher: Yes, Masha and the Bear. What happens three times in Masha and the Bear?

Awdar: She was saying, I'm looking at you.

Teacher: That's the one. Is there a repetition in Zerin's story?

Mercam: Yes!

Teacher: What's the line?

Zerin: Don't cry, Bird, don't cry, I'll give you something.

Teacher: That's a good line. Do you think we can say this line in Kurdish, since this is a Kurdish story?

Zerin: I'm gonna tell it in Kurdish?

Teacher: Yeah, do you mind?

Zerin: OK, but what about the American people don't speak Kurdish.

Teacher: We'll try to write it in Kurdish, and then we'll write it in English too. OK?

Students: Yeah! Good!

In the original story, a clever little bird named Chichik successfully trades small possessions into larger and larger possessions. The plot requires the bird to absent himself several times, and ask various story characters to watch his possessions for him, at which they invariably fail. In Zerin's retelling of the story, the bird announces that he must go to the bathroom. During the revision process, the students suggest to change that detail to make the story acceptable to their potential American readers.

Awdar: We must change the part when Chichik went to the bathroom.

Teacher: Why should we change that?

Awdar: Because American people wouldn't like a bathroom.

Selwer: And there was no bathroom there, and people would think there was a bathroom.

Teacher: That there was a bathroom where the bird went, but that's not the way it was.

Selwer: People would think he was gonna go to a real bathroom. How could a bird go to the bathroom like that?

Teacher: Is that why?

Zerin: I said "bathroom" because we can't say he went to pee. It wouldn't be... polite.

Teacher: Oh, I see. Is that what you all think?

Group: Yeah. Yes.

Teacher: You're right, we wouldn't expect to read about peeing, or going to the bathroom in an American story. Is that what the real Kurdish story says?

Aram: He went to pee.

Group: Yeah. Yeah. (Giggles.)

Teacher: Aha! So Zerin had to change that, I see now.

Zerin: I changed other things, too.

Teacher: Oh, did you? You had changed things before you told us the story?

Zerin: Yes. When I said the farmer ate milk and grass, it wasn't grass, but I didn't want to say it.

Teacher: What did he eat?

Group: Uhmmmm... [Giggles and a quick exchange in Kurdish.]

Teacher: Aaah, I can guess. What the bird was eating in the Kurdish story wasn't appropriate to say in English, so Zerin changed that to grass, right?

Selwer: Because American people wouldn't like it.

Teacher: I see. Good thinking. I guess grass works. But now we need to solve the bathroom problem. Figure out where we're going to send Chichik instead of the bathroom. What do you think?

The students demonstrate not only a strong sense of audience, but also of their intended audience's different norms with regard to storytelling. They perceive an element of their cultural heritage through the lens of another culture, and make a deliberate effort to adapt it to conform to the others' expectations. This perspective is not only surprisingly mature, given the students' ages, but legitimately cross-cultural.

It thus appears that immersion in a learning environment congruent with their home culture did not prevent the students from developing a positive attitude towards the culture of their hosts despite their initial resistance to it. One can reasonably assume that the students' own heightened sense of ethnic and cultural identity and their optimistic self-image, an effect of being educated within their own group, contributed to their acceptance of, and respect for, the host culture.

Conclusions

The culturally homogenous learning environment of the self-contained classroom created unique opportunities for the Iraqi children to advance academically, strengthen their sense of ethnic and cultural identity, and gain appreciation and respect for the host culture. Although it is impossible to prove that the same results would not have been achieved if the students had stayed dispersed among 12 mainstream classrooms for another year, the probability of such outcomes would have been low.

It is not unreasonable to speculate that, even with special education services, they would have most likely gone on struggling academically, feeling alienated both from their American peers and from their compatriots. Had they stayed in the mainstream classrooms, would have they explored their past experiences, competed with their stories, and used their collective "cultural voice" to give one another feedback on their narratives? In a group of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, whose cultural norms would be used as criteria to evaluate their stories? In the absence of a multicultural consensus, would the norms of White middle class America invariably prevail as the yardstick to measure quality and determine appropriateness? Or would all criteria have to be abandoned, and all judgements suspended?

Some of the above questions are at best rhetorical at this point, but nevertheless worth consideration. A truly multicultural learning environment, one in which no single cultural paradigm prevails, affording all cultural perspectives equal validity, is an attractive ideal that may never be practically implementable in our public education system. Mock-multicultural environments, in which ethnic and cultural minority students are given attention primarily as tokens of difference, but rarely allowed their own cultural voice, do not appear to enhance these students' academic performance and improve their chances of school success (at least, this kind of multicultural environment did not facilitate learning for the Iraqi students at Edison).

Hybridized cultural environments, on the other hand, in which the norms, values, and expectations inherent in our public education system provide space for the norms, values, and expectations of students from outside the majority culture, appear to positively affect these students' experience of the education process and their academic performance.

In the Edison case, that space within the mainstream school culture was created by implementing two measures. The first was placing the underperforming Iraqi children in the same classroom, which enabled them to recapture a sense of group identity, display initiative and assume leadership roles, and manage their social behaviour according to their cultural prescriptions, without the pressure to "act American." The second was injecting the curriculum with content relevant to the students' past and current experiences and congruent with their cultural knowledge and perspectives. This validated the students' home culture as socially relevant and academically important; moreover, the students' ownership of the instructional content that referenced their experiential knowledge afforded them control over their learning.

As I hope it is clear from the transcripts and samples of the students' work included in this article, the adaptation of the curriculum to embrace culturally relevant content did not compromise the academic standards; despite poorer command of the English language compared to native speakers, the Iraqi students' intellectual engagement with concepts and ideas was at the levels expected of their age groups. Contrary to the doubts and fears expressed by the Edison community before the intervention, the students' "segregation" into a culturally homogenous group of low performers did not appear to limit their access to equal educational opportunities or have any negative impact on their academic progress; neither did the separation from their American peers prevent them from gaining insights into, and learning to appreciate, the American culture.

Last but not least, it must be emphasized that the Edison intervention did not contradict the precepts of multicultural education: it achieved the goal of enabling a group of educationally disadvantaged minority students to experience educational equality and achieve academic success.

The Edison story confirms what some earlier studies of minority student groups have demonstrated, namely that "students' performance in school is directly affected by the relationship between the cultural patterns supported by the school and those adhered to by the students. Where there is congruence and compatibility between the two, the probability for success in school is enhanced" (Gibson, 1982, p. 3). The primary reason why the Iraqi students at Edison were successful in their self-contained classroom is the same as the reason why White middle-class students are, as a group, the most successful in American schools: the congruence between the home and the school cultures.

However, the problem with case studies such as this one is that they are not easily replicable. The success of the intervention must be credited, at least partly, to the specific circumstances that made its implementation possible in the first place. It was rather fortunate, in this case, that the students in need of an academic boost shared the same background: country, culture, languages, experience as refugees, and also happened to live in the same neighborhood. There was just the right number of students with similar academic needs to justify creating a self-contained class: had the number been much larger, this kind of a program would not have been feasible; if the number had been considerably smaller, the problem may not have been perceived as serious enough to require special measures. We were also fortunate to have access to the resources of the local State University of New York campus, especially the student-interns, whose reliable presence in the classroom contributed significantly to the program's success.

Even though the interplay of factors that produced the outcomes of the Edison intervention would be hard to duplicate given the realities of American public schools, it is my hope that the knowledge that the present study has generated will find application across a range of educational settings which serve culturally diverse populations, and specifically, English-learning new-

comers. Of course, since schools' ethnic, linguistic, and cultural landscapes vary enormously, and since non-cultural factors cannot be ignored, no prescriptions can be dispensed; school communities need to find their own solutions.

To the educational practitioners who feel whole-heartedly committed to the ideals of diversity and inclusion, the notion of grouping children for instruction by cultural background may seem not only counter-intuitive, but wholly detestable. One needs to bear in mind, however, that what seems politically right for the adult society does not always serve the children's purposes equally well. Moreover, political ideas in education, no matter how unquestionably right they seem to be at a given moment, eventually become re-evaluated and sometimes discarded.

For example, in the past, co-educational schools were considered the only right path towards gender equality; now we are rediscovering advantages of single-sex schools (Salomone, 2003; Streitmatter, 1999). To quote Herr and Arms, "assumptions about segregation, whether by race, sex, class, or disability must be tempered by research that provides data about the particular conditions under which segregating children in schools or among schools might lead to better social and educational outcomes" (2004, p. 528). It is therefore my hope that future studies will further explore and corroborate the benefits of temporary "cultural segregation" on the academic performance of at-risk ELL students.

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