Chapter 12

A Photo–Narrative of the Sociolinguistic and Sociocultural Identities of a Refugee Adolescent: Through His Eyes

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ABSTRACT

One’s linguistic discourse is directly linked to his or her identity construction. The author conducted a qualitative study that investigated the sociolinguistic and sociocultural identities, both current and imagined, of a newly arrived adolescent of refugee status, named Yerodin, through a photo-narrative approach. Yerodin was unique in that he was 11 years old when he arrived to the United States but did not have any prior formalized schooling. Therefore, he was illiterate in both his first language of Swahili and second language of English. This study took place during a summer school program that sought to develop Yerodin and his siblings’ literacy skills before the upcoming school year. Findings illustrated Yerodin’s current identity as one who appreciated his experiences in the refugee camp prior to resettlement and as an English learner. Furthermore, Yerodin realized that English, his second language, and academics were key to accessing his desired communities of identity, including aspects of American culture and friendships with “American peers.”

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR; 2017a), the total number of persons of concern increased by 5.4 percent from 2016, worldwide. It should be noted that UNHCR has also referred to persons of concern as forcibly displaced from their homes due to “persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations” (UNHCR, 2016b, p. 2). The International
Committee of the Red Cross (2010) considered a person who has been displaced as having left their home(s) due to violence or life threatening conditions but who, however, may still reside in their home country. Thus, the total population of persons of concern increased from 67.7 million in January 2017 to 71.44 million in December 2017 (UNHCR, 2017a). Of this figure, 19,941,347 individuals were considered to be refugees (UNHCR, 2017b). Even though the majority of refugees receive support from their new host country, a small portion of refugees will resettle to a third country (U.S. Department of State, 2015a). The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Article 1A(2)) defined a refugee as having:

A well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2016).

Since 1975, more than 3 million refugees have resettled amongst all 50 states throughout the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2014). In May 2016, UNHCR (2016a) reported that 274,088 individuals held refugee status in the United States. In a published report by the U.S. Department of State (2017), the United States admitted 84,994 individuals with refugee status during the fiscal year of 2016. However, since the Trump administration took office, immigration to the United States saw an overall decline. This declination extended to individuals with refugee status at 53,716 during fiscal year of 2017 (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

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Refugee minors, those who are under the age of 18 years old, increased from 41 percent in 2009 to 51 percent in 2015, worldwide (UNHCR, 2016a). Of the 84,994 individuals admitted to the United States in 2016, 44.37 percent, or 37,712 individuals, were minors (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Of those who were minors, 12,295 individuals were of school-age (i.e., between 5-17 years old; U.S. Department of State, 2017). In the U.S. Department of States’ (2018) most current report, those who were classified as minors and school-aged children were not reported for the fiscal year of 2017.

Upon resettlement, school-aged children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds are required to adapt to significantly different ways of living while simultaneously experiencing physical and psychological changes that are crucial to their developmental growth (Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010). In addition to these developmental changes, these students are burdened with the tasks of understanding their purposes in life while adapting to a foreign environment, including its language and behavioral norms (Mosselson, 2006). For these reasons, Guerrero and Tinkler (2010) suggested that children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds, as with all displaced children, are a “particularly vulnerable population” (p. 55). Furthermore, Mosselson (2006) regarded this demographic of adolescents as the population “most at risk with respect to school performance and general well-being” (p. 21).

Despite these potential challenges, the majority of adolescents with refugee status in the United States find that the schools in which they are enrolled upon resettlement become the first and most significant