

My Struggle Made Me Smart:
Discursive Resistance in the Personal Narrative of a
Refugee-background Student



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Discourse

- **d**iscourse is (Cameron & Panović, 2014)
 - language “above the sentence level”
 - “language in use”
 - “a form of social practice” using language
- **D**iscourse(s) are “*ways of being in the world,*” including “*words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities...*” that can be explored through linguistic analysis (Gee, 2007).

Premises of (Critical) Discourse Analysis

- ❖ Analysis of language can provide valuable insights to many disciplines—not just to Linguistics.
- ❖ Language-in-use, including personal narrative, reflects social and political conditions, including power dynamics
- ❖ Language perpetuates ideology, so attending to language might help to change how people think and behave.
 - * *Sociolinguistics students: Does this sound familiar?* 😊

Why stories matter



“It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is *nkali*. It's a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of *nkali*: **How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it **the definitive story** of that person.”**

Master Narratives (the ‘definitive story’)



“immigrant

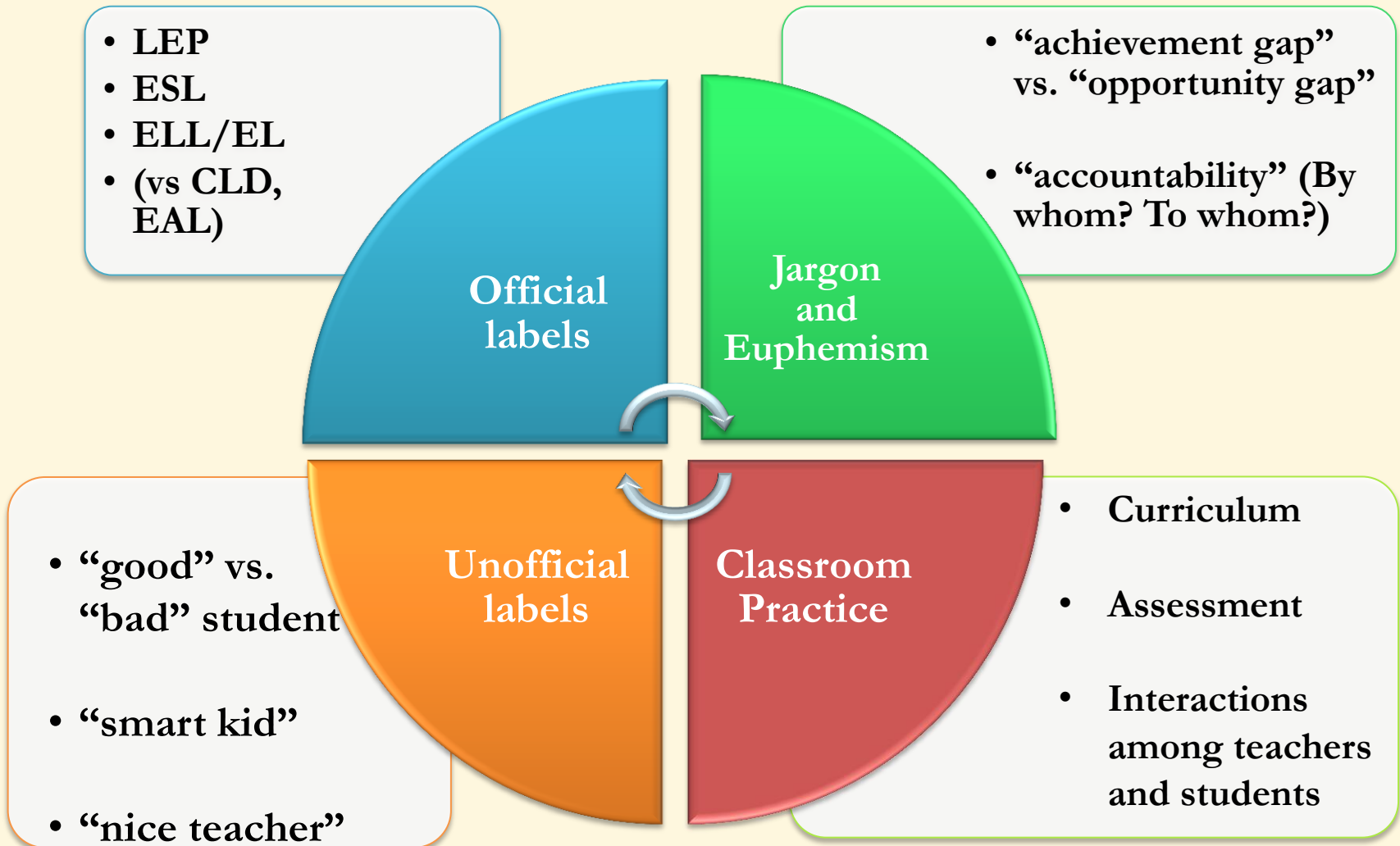


“refugee”



“Africa”

How does educational discourse perpetuate master narratives?



Deficit Discourse

emphasizes what students lack, rather than what they bring to their schooling experiences.

(e.g., Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro, 2014)

“Limited English Proficient” (LEP)

“preliterate” *

Students with “limited or interrupted formal education” (SLIFE) *

“underperforming”

Or “at risk” students
(and schools)

“trauma” *

*Especially common in regards to **refugee-background** students

Research Questions

1. What do students perceive as deficit discourse?

What attributes or stories do they feel are overlooked by peers, teachers, and administrators?

2. What impact does deficit discourse have on students?

How might deficit discourse lead to policies and practices that limit opportunity for refugee-background (RB) students?

3. How can deficit discourse be **resisted** in classrooms, schools, and community?

Context



- Burlington and Winooski ,VT
refugee resettlement communities
 - 1st wave: Bosnian, Vietnamese (1990s)
 - 2nd wave: Somali Bantu (and others from Africa & S. Asia)
(2004-today)

- Burlington School District
 - ~15% refugee-background students
 - “New Americans” (ELLs) major focus for school reform
 - Protest in 2012 by “African” students
 - Conflicting narratives about WHY the protest happened and WHAT has changed since.
 - **Representation** was a major factor (Shapiro, 2014)

Case Study: “Najib”

- Somali Bantu
- male
- Muslim
- Soccer player
- Family lived in Kenyan refugee camp for 12 years (Najib was 2-14 years old)
- One of first Somali Bantu arrivals to BSD (2004)
 - Attended 9th-12th grade at Burlington HS
 - Attained Associate’s degree from state college
- Charismatic, well-liked
- Respected family

Data

- Najib's interview on VPR
(recording and transcript)
- My private interview with Najib
(recorded and transcribed)
- Chapters 1 and 2 of Najib's memoir
-originally a Sociology class assignment
- Interviews with college faculty/staff
- three who worked closely with Najib
- Newspaper articles and other documents
- Participant observation in BSD

Coding the data

Round 1: Isolating “asset” segments

Round 2: Labeling types of asset

choice/ agency

educational history

language/ literacy resources

service/ leadership

value/ motivation for education

intelligence

success in school

[other attributes]

Round 3: Synthesizing into meta-themes

Agency Critical Awareness Contribution

Coding samples

DEFICIT CATEGORY	ASSET CATEGORY	SAMPLE SEGMENT OF ASSET CATEGORY
Powerlessness/ Victimization	Choice/Agency	“I started my own business in the refugee camp at the age of eleven or twelve. I have always been extremely independent.”
Lack of value/motivation for education	Value/motivation for education	“[My mom] doesn’t care if there’s nothing to eat at home—she wanted me to go to school. . . . I shouldn’t be at this level without her support.”
Lack of educational history	Educational history	“I remember that my mom started to go to school in the refugee camp. She went every day. She wanted to get an education; she did that for our family. She . . . had been denied an education.”
Limited intelligence	Intelligence, Critical Reflection	“ESL class is not bad at all, as long as you’re learning something, but I’m just saying, maybe I should get pushed a little harder.”
Being helped (rather than helping others)	Service/leadership	“[My uncle] became like a leader. He gained some trust with the police, who realized he was a good guy, who was just trying to help his people.”

Theme 1: Agency

- “How individuals can exercise their will to determine their own fate” (Varghese, 2012, p. 151).
- Not just action, but also discursive representation
 - “victim” vs. “survivor”
 - “refugee” vs. “immigrant” (or “global citizen”)

Agency during migration

- Najib's grandmother confronts the bandits
 - “If you want to kill us, go ahead and kill us. We are telling you the truth; we are Bantus.”
- Najib's uncle calms the police
 - “He calmed them down by being generous and not aggressive.”
 - As a result, he “gained some trust” and “became like a leader” in the camp.

Agency in the refugee camp

“I wasn’t old enough to work like my dad would, but I had to do something to help us. . . I thought of making soccer balls using dirty plastic bags and torn clothes or scraps from the tailor. To make the soccer balls, you need a lot of plastic bags put together. You start small and build the plastic ball by melting plastic together until it becomes solid. It takes a long time, but by using a fire, you can make a bigger and harder ball. It takes five to six hours to make the plastic ball. Then it takes another five or six hours to make the cloth covering. You sew the covering by hand with needle and thread. You have to put three or four layers of cloth...”

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/02/soccer-joy/berlin-text>



Agency in U.S. schools

- Starting school in 9th (vs. 8th) grade
- Requesting placement in a more challenging math class, because “I was, like acing it all the time.”
- Asking numerous times to be “exited” from ELL (vs. mainstream) classes
- Taking advantage of support in college
 - “I was really good talking with teachers and getting help and stuff.”
 - College staff: “He’s a stellar person. . . .And he really pushed himself”



Agency as social identity

“I started my own business in the refugee camp at the age of eleven or twelve. I have always been extremely independent. I have always had a good mind for figuring things out. I always have been a problem-solver. I knew if I worked hard and put my mind to something, that I could make a difference. I was always a hard worker. I was a survivor.”

“That struggle is something I put myself into...I made myself, like, harder, and that made me really smart.”



Theme 2: Critical Awareness

- Unequal distribution of resources in camp
 - Bribery for basic needs (e.g., water)
- Prevalence of child labor
 - Go to school or help your family?
- Poor planning on the part of UNHCR
 - Resources not allocated to meet growing population
 - Plastic roofs “eaten away” by the sun



Critical awareness at school

- **Grade inflation**

- “How is this possible? . . . I can’t even read it. . . How did I get an A? . . . I don’t mind the grade, but I want to know what I can change. . . . I don’t just need credit. . . What did I learn from that?”



- **Lack of mentorship**

- “The problem is that when you don’t know anything about college, and nobody talks to you, you’re, like, blind. You’re just making choices like, ‘Whatever they’re telling me.’”

- **Culture of low expectations**

- “I just feel like. . . maybe they want to have more janitors in here, you know?”

Theme 3: Contribution

Family's job skills and artisanship

- N's mother- knew how to make plaster from mud and cow dung (for homes in camp)
- N's father- figured out how to preserve plastic roofing using grass
 - Also “master musician”
- N's uncle- made his own knife
- N's brother- works as interpreter for school district



Najib's Contributions

- Soccer ball business
 - Recruited other kids so they could “help their families”
 - Offered discounted rate for families that had less money
- Athletics (soccer)
 - Won many awards, including top player in state
 - Served as community coach
- Role model for “ESL kids”



Potential contributions

❖ Forming peer-to-peer mentoring networks

“You got to give somebody the credit. . .When you see a person. . .do something good, make sure that you award him with that. . . .He’s gonna be a role model, and that will encourage a lot of kids and they’ll want to be in the same position.”

❖ Tapping into family/community capital

I’m gonna just say, this is about making family. . . . If you bring all kids together and you’re telling them . . . all positive stuff. . . . “We want you to have a family, a future, and we’ll be working hard on you”. . . . We just got to bring more **love** to the community, in order for these kids to change.

Limitations and Possibilities

- Single case study—not generalizable, but still generative
 - Where else might we look for examples of asset discourse?
- Danger of “reification”
 - Are there potential downsides to asset discourse?
 - “I need to go somewhere where people will know me—my name—at the end of the day”
- Not longitudinal
 - How might Najib think about his life and schooling experiences today?
- Hard to prove that discourse shapes thought and behavior
 - How might we investigate the impact of a discursive shift?

Implications—Who cares?

- ❖ Refugee-background students often “passed over” for school leadership, academic honors, and other opportunities (Montero et al, 2012)
 - Most common complaint about ELL classes: “too easy” (Callahan, 2005; Shapiro, 2014)
- ❖ College participation (or lack thereof) often attributed to *language*, rather than to other factors (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Mitchell, 2012)
- ❖ Many immigrant/refugee students feel that schools simply “don’t care” about them (e.g., Valenzuela, 1999)
- ❖ Families of immigrant/refugee students often thought of as an “obstacle,” rather than a resource (e.g., Varghese, 2012)

Conclusions

- ❖ There is still a “single story” that dominates in research on refugee-background students
- ❖ Educators (and researchers) must learn to recognize student challenges without ignoring student assets
- ❖ These assets can become educational resources
 - Culturally responsive/globally oriented curriculum
 - Sustained mentorship and leadership opportunities
 - Community-building– “making family” at school



“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”
-- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Thank You!

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