

## Complicating Translation: Children with Refugee Status and Special Education Testing

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Drawing upon four years of ethnographic work, we share findings from a narrative analysis of two student experiences situated at the intersection of language, disability, and refugee status in the United States. We emphasize how the practices and discourses within two predominantly White, monolingual schools positioned Burundian children and families with refugee status as needing special services. Taking up a critical orientation to disability (Oliver, 1990; Thomas, 1999), we contrast the ways in which the institutionalized practices foreclosed opportunities for some, while opening avenues of support for others. Informed by Foucault's (1990) work on theorizing power, we analyze the everyday experiences of two Burundian children with refugee status inside school spaces. We highlight how these children, both of whom were English language learners, were identified and considered for special education.

*Keywords:* Burundians, disability, English language learners, refugee resettlement, refugee status, special education, theories of power

**Transitioning** to a new society of settlement has been described as a difficult process for many people with refugee status, particularly children. While researchers and government agencies have documented the unique characteristics and needs of people with refugee status, particularly adult refugees, far less research has attended to those everyday interactions and experiences that influence the transition of children with refugee status (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). As children move into U.S. public schools and neighborhoods, many children with refugee status face a myriad of challenges, from learning a new language and culture to mastering a new set of school-based norms and practices. Furthermore, Africans with refugee status who are classified in the United States for race as Black encounter unique difficulties as they learn to navigate the racial hierarchies embedded within U.S. education and economic systems (Awokoya, 2012; Olsen, 2000; Rong & Brown, 2002; Wallitt, 2008). Yet, to date, relatively little research has documented how everyday school life intersects and mediates the education experiences of African refugee children.

Given this context, in this study we retrace the steps taken in schools in Riverhill<sup>1</sup>—a predominantly White, monolingual city in southern Appalachia—where we spent the last four years engaged in ethnographic and community work aimed at exploring the resettlement experiences of Burundian families with refugee status. Across this research and community engagement, we have worked closely with our collaborator and translator, Rukondo, who

frequently accompanied us when we met with Burundian families in their homes. Through this collaboration, we learned of many Burundian children being considered for placement in special education. Over the course of two years, we observed the systematic tracking of Burundian children into special education classes, often based on assessments administered in English—their second language—sometimes with and sometimes without a translator. Parents were frequently asked to complete surveys and assessment protocols designed to corroborate what school staff identified as “behavioral problems.” Yet, these surveys were described as difficult, if not impossible, to translate, as many of the diagnostic questions did not have meaning in Kirundi, the parents’ and children’s primary language. In this article, we focus specifically on the moments and experiences surrounding two of the Burundian children who were considered for special education services.

Taking up a critical orientation to disability (Oliver, 1990; Thomas, 1999), we contrast the ways in which the institutionalized practices functioned to foreclose opportunities for some, while opening avenues of support for others. As we share these accounts, we work to re-embodiment memory and story (Behar, 1991), drawing upon postcritical ethnography (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). Throughout, we recognize that what we share is partial and positional and that there is much left to tell (Noblit, 1999). We conclude by calling for practitioners to engage in thoughtful advocacy for the children and youth who enter their classrooms, particularly as many of these children work to navigate a new language and a new society of settlement.

### **Setting the Context**

There are more than 250 Burundian families currently living in Riverhill. From 2007 to 2009, the United States began resettling approximately 9,000 Burundians. Because U.S. refugee resettlement policies require that refugees be relocated across multiple U.S. cities, many Burundians were resettled in different regions of the country. Prior to resettling in the United States, the Burundian refugees lived in camps in Tanzania after years of flight across the Great Lakes region of Africa. Burundi, a small country in this region, is located to the west and north of Tanzania, east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and south of Rwanda. The Burundians who began arriving in Riverhill had previously fled to Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania in 1972 after a Tutsi-dominated government ordered a Tutsi-dominated military to repress a Hutu uprising. What followed was genocidal violence perpetrated by the military against the Hutu population (Lemarchand, 1998, 1994). Many of the Burundians who had settled in Rwanda fled again in 1994, when Hutus supporting the Hutu Power movement massacred Tutsi and Hutu sympathizers (Gourevitch, 1999). For most Burundians in Riverhill, the United States was their third country of resettlement. Though many grew up speaking Kirundi, Swahili, and French, few spoke any English when they arrived. Within months of their arrival, Burundian adults described the challenges of having little to no access to English classes, below-minimum-wage employment, and school meetings without translators. Further, Riverhill was a predominantly monolingual, White city with few resources for families with refugee status. Administrators in the public health department, the public school system, and the regional resettlement organization (Greenland Co-Sponsorship and Refugee Services) were unprepared to offer services (Anders & Lester, 2014; Lester & Anders, 2013).

Animosity existed between administrators in the department of English Language Learning and teachers in the Riverhill County Schools (RCS) system, and the director and staff of Greenland, an ecumenical, non-profit organization that resettled people with refugee status in the area. A group of teachers and administrators met with state representatives to try to shut Greenland down so that the organization could not resettle any more families with refugee status in the area (Mariner, Anders, & Lester, 2013). In reality, both the schools and the resettlement organization lacked resources and personnel. Principals and teachers enrolled Burundian children into their schools without any training, professional development, or resources. For instance, “. . . one English Second Language (ESL) teacher found an English-Kirundi dictionary on the Internet and printed it so she could begin to communicate with her students” (Lester & Anders, 2013, p. 15). Underfunded, under-resourced, and understaffed, Greenland relied heavily upon co-sponsors, a group of five to 15 individuals, often from a local church, to aid in the resettlement process. Unfortunately, most Burundian families arrived without any co-sponsors. In that situation, a case manager from Greenland became the family’s only point of contact.

We have argued elsewhere that the deployment of Nativist, “whitestream” practices in Riverhill schools positioned parental concerns and rights as irrelevant (Mariner et al., 2013). Against monolithic descriptions of disability in English, Burundian parents fought to interpret the multiple translations that took place in school Support Team and Individualized Education Program meetings (Lester & Anders, 2013). Concurrently, parents were required to assess whether or not they could trust the help described to them for their child, while evaluating whether or not they would be threatened if they asked questions that might challenge the authority of White professionals. Performing from positions of fear and obligatory responsiveness to Western, White, middle-class assessments, the Burundian parents and children were subjected to a system that often led to educational placements that turned out to be the most restrictive of environments.

### **The Pathologizing of Bodies**

Both Malkki’s (1996) work on the construction and representation of a national identity among Hutus with refugee status and Foucault’s work on theorizing power (1990) inform the ways we interpret everyday experiences with resettlement. Malkki critiqued the process by which academics and medical professionals pathologize people with refugee status through the discourses of medicine and psychology. Ignoring the sociopolitical context of displacement in their analyses, such professionals often locate disorder on and in the body of a refugee. Malkki suggested that:

The more contemporary field of “refugee studies” is quite different in spirit from the postwar literature. However, it shares with earlier texts the premise that refugees are necessarily “a problem.” They are not ordinary people, but represent rather an anomaly requiring specialized correctives and therapeutic interventions. It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates “the problem” not in the political conditions or processes that produce massive territorial displacements of people, but, rather, within the bodies and minds (and even souls) of people categorized as refugees . . . Our sedentary assumptions about attachment to place lead us to define displacement

not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced. (p. 443)

The problem, then, exists within the bodies of individuals, with the exclusion of the politics and conflicts that generated the very refugee status assigned to them.

Foucault's (1990) conception of relationships across discourses and power provides us with a way to interrogate the process Malkki documented. Foucault argued that power is the "moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power" (p. 93). These states of power are always "local and unstable" (p. 93). Discourse harnesses the potential to generate and to curtail power in the relationships we navigate across the institutions and structures in which we work and in the everyday decisions we produce in the practice of acquiescing to or refusing policies, laws, and regulatory norms. For Foucault, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (p. 101). Foucault queried the relationships across discourses and power, asking: What is ensured in a response to the deployment of particular discourses? In other words, what has to take place to generate particular responses or which responses reflect particular discourses? In this case, we ask: If a child is placed or tracked into special education, what discourses needed to be present in order for this to occur? And how did Burundian parents respond to the possible placement and with which discourses?

### **Orientations to Disability and Educational Access**

In our community and ethnographic work, we have also taken up a social-relational perspective to the meaning(s) of disability, abnormality, and normality. Disability, from a social-relational perspective (Thomas, 1999), is located at the nexus of culture and biology. This perspective distinguishes between an impairment effect, those bodily realities that people experience as a result of their impairments, and disability, those limitations in one's physical and cultural activities due to restrictions that the environment imposes. Beyond this, we have also come to recognize that:

Positioning pathologies on the body produces representations that bound individuals to an assignment. The process contributes to discrimination and oppression, and generates discourses that emphasize individual transition rather than systemic changes in resources, resettlement, and policy. (Lester & Anders, 2013, pp. 73–74)

Like Farmer (2005), we suggest that "any distinguishing characteristic, whether social or biological, can serve as a pretext for discrimination and thus as a cause of suffering" (p. 46). Thus, it is with caution that we come to name one way of being in the world abnormal, while another is positioned as normal. In addition, these understandings are located in relation to how special education laws have historically evolved and can be presently actualized.

Public Law 94-142 (also known as Education for All Handicapped Children Act) was initially passed in 1975. This law required that all public schools offer children with disability labels access to education. The law was critical for providing educational opportunities to children with disabilities. Yet, some have argued that following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the discourses of ability began to replace the discourses of race (Ferri & Connor, 2006), allowing for segregation to occur in legalized ways. In other words, with children of color

disproportionality diagnosed with disability labels, there was a legalized means by which to segregate. This is not to suggest that Public Law 94-142 did not address the lack of educational opportunities being offered to children with disability labels; the reality of disproportionality in special education, however, highlights the structural and institutional practices that have served to sustain segregation.

With Public Law 94-142 changed and renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, new revisions clarified that all children with disability labels should be prepared for further education, as well as employment and independent living. Yet, historically, both in the United States and in other countries, inequitable treatment of those labeled disabled has often been positioned as justifiable. For example, from the 1800s to the early 1900s, public calls against granting citizenship to immigrants and people of African descent was often based on the inherent assumption that they were disabled and/or mentally inferior (Bayton, 2001). Beratan (2008) suggested that “society’s willingness to perceive discrimination against disabled people as being the result of individual deficiencies is [often] used to make racism more palatable” (p. 345). Specifically, special education classification rates for African Americans and Native Americans are higher in those categories “that depend on clinical judgment rather than on verifiable biological data” (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p. 2). It is estimated that students of African descent make up about 16.3% of the school population; yet, Heward and Cavanaugh (2001) reported that 31% of these students are labeled with “mild mental retardation” or “emotional disturbance” (Heward & Cavanaugh, 2001). Some writers have suggested that this overrepresentation is the result of narrow definitions of what it means to learn and how cognition and affect are conceived (Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997).

While IDEA does indeed stand as a legalized vehicle by which to increase access to education for students with disabilities, the ways in which the related practices are carried out have resulted in racial sorting. It was these legalized practices, occurring at the interaction of race, disability, and language differences, that we encountered in our ethnographic work with the Burundian children.

### **Methodological Commitments**

We engage in our work with commitments to postcritical ethnography (Anders, 2011; Anders & Lester, 2011; Noblit et al., 2004). The “critical,” in postcritical ethnography, incorporates the histories of critical theories and critical ethnography. According to Noblit et al. (2004), “one of the central ideas guiding critical ethnography is that social life is constructed in contexts of power” (p. 4); thus, as we study the everyday experiences of resettlement, we analyze the contexts of power in which they occur. The “post” in postcritical ethnography reflects the incorporation of postmodern and poststructural perspectives in this discipline. Most postmodernists and poststructuralists work from antifoundational perspectives and challenge claims to objective knowledge; ethnographers are encouraged to challenge claims of certainty. Practicing postcritical ethnography demands, then, that we work against monolithic representations and claims of objectivity. Every representation is “always partial and positional” (Noblit et al., 2004, p. 22), and therefore also personal. Noblit et al. (2004) suggested that “postcritical ethnographies require the interrogation of the power and politics of the critic himself/herself as well as in the social scene studied” (p. 18). Given this mandate,

postcritical ethnography demands that we question our beliefs as we engage in relationships with participants, community members, and in the process of analysis. As Noblit et al. (2004) noted:

Postcritical ethnographies in an important sense are not designed but enacted or produced as moral activity. Postcritical ethnographers then must assume they exist within a critical discourse that in part makes them responsible for the world they are producing when they interpret and critique. (p. 24)

Consequently, researching with commitments to postcritical ethnography requires the practice of recursive reflexivity (Anders, 2011), the critique of our own authorities as critics and ethnographers (Noblit et al., 2004), and the acknowledgement of research as a moral endeavor (Noblit et al., 2004).

### **Data Sources**

The work we share here is part of a larger ethnographic study we began in 2008, which included six focus groups with 39 Burundian men and women, school interviews with five teachers and three administrators, community interviews with over twenty co-sponsors, and staff interviews with the regional co-sponsorship and refugee services organization. In this paper, we returned to fieldnotes collected from 2009-2010 in classroom and school observations at Red Valley Elementary School and Eastern Valley Elementary School, where many of the Burundian children attended. Teachers and students at Red Valley Elementary School were predominantly White—77% were White students, 16% were Black students, 5% Hispanic, and less than 1% Asian. Over 75% of the students at Red Valley Elementary School received free or reduced lunch. At Eastern Valley Elementary School, 63% of the students were White, 27% were Black, 8% were Hispanic, 1% were Asian, and less than 1% were American Indian/Alaskan Native. Over 89% of the students received free or reduced lunch.

In 2009–2010, we each completed participant-observations, serving as classroom volunteers twice a week for two to three hours in a third-grade classroom at Red Valley Elementary School. During this time, we went with the class to the library and gymnasium when they were instructed to do so; in addition, we attended school and community events. Once a week we completed school-wide observations in the cafeteria, library, and ESL corner of a room designed for four different pull-out programs. We took note of bulletin boards, student assignments, and artwork and awards displayed in the hallways, and interactions between teachers and students. Also, from 2008–2011, with a small group of university student volunteers, we tutored Burundian children for over 1,500 hours in the government housing projects where Greenland had placed many of the families. We conducted four formal interviews and had over 90 informal interactions with two of the Burundian families whose sons were being considered for special education. These meetings led to our attending two meetings with one of the Burundian children’s mental health counselors and a psychologist at Global Elixirs—the health-care system to which Burundians had access. Furthermore, at Red Valley Elementary School, I (Lester) participated in one Support Team meeting and one special education meeting, and, at Eastern Valley Elementary School, I attended one meeting with a Burundian mother, a translator, and a psychologist. Rukondo,<sup>2</sup> our translator and collaborator, served as the translator during all of

our interviews, informal meetings, and the Support Team and special education meetings (i.e., an Individualized Education Program meeting).

### **Data Analysis**

Wanting to explore both relationships of power and “intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 132), we carried out narrative analysis. Narrative analysis requires a representation of context, which thematic analysis may or may not include. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), narrative analysis focuses on “the social action” (p. 62) of and within the representation. Produced from “context-dependent infrastructure” and “focused to explain the effect (intended or unintended, implicit or explicit)” of what transpired, narrative analysis positions experience “as situated within particular interactions and within specific social, cultural, and institutional discourses” (p. 62). By this definition, to engage in narrative analysis means to critically interpret and represent experience at the intersections of “social, cultural, and institutional discourses” (p. 62).

More specifically, for our analysis, we returned to our fieldnotes around two student experiences with special education. These fieldnotes were collected independently over the course of one year, but shared and discussed collectively. Representing our fieldnotes through narrative allowed us to address intersections across relationships, institutions, conflicts, and political identities. We began by reading and rereading across the fieldnotes to acquire a broad sense of what, who, and why particular bodies were positioned as they were within the contexts of focus. Here, we made general theoretical memos, drawing upon theories of power (Foucault, 1990) as we recorded these initial impressions. Next, we began coding for the type of narrative (e.g., story of naming/labeling, story of institutional power, story of collaboration), while also coding for purpose, setting, and certain aspects of plot. Finally, we crafted two representative narratives. We represented, in partial and positional ways, the contrasting ways in which two young Burundian boys were considered for special education. We share our representations next.

### **Representations of Analysis**

Like many children who become the locus for the operations of institutional practices and bodies of knowledge (Nadesan, 2005), many of the Burundian children were quickly constructed, as Malkki noted, “as a problem . . . requiring specialized correctives and therapeutic interventions” (p. 443). This naming of another’s way of being as “a problem” is embedded within particular institutional histories, discourses, and practices geared toward fixing an atypically developing child. Such discourses and practices are situated within the history of the emergence of childhood as a qualitatively unique social stage, wherein abnormal and normal forms of development are presumed to exist (Aries, 1962). Here, we caution against collapsing and essentializing the multifaceted experiences of a child into a description of a disability. We suggest that doing so forecloses opportunities for educators to respond in productive ways to the intersections of a child’s identity, including the saliency of language. Furthermore, we argue that educators and special education advocates need to reflect on the intersection of language and the everyday processes of testing a child for special education, as “once the discourse of disability is set into motion, a child’s problems become defined as disability, and that disability as fact” (Lester & Anders, 2013, p. 77).

We next consider the demands of navigating academic, bureaucratic, linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical translations, as we represent two scenarios constructed from our fieldnotes and analysis involving the parents and educators of two young Burundian boys. Specifically, we consider this through the sharing of two narratives involving different participants in different contexts located in Riverhill. The first narrative focuses on the experiences that Spiderman, a third-grader, has in being tested and identified as troubled. The second narrative stands in contrast to Spiderman's and illustrates the way in which Marguerite, a Burundian mother, was invited to participate in making sense of her son's troubles.

### **A Story of Naming: Spiderman's "Differences"**

It was in late spring of 2010 when we realized Spiderman's ESL teacher and classroom teacher had been testing him in hopes of a placement in special education. We reached out to a psychologist who had just begun to work with him. The CEO of Global Elixirs, a private health service company, had dedicated a small percentage of the psychologist's time to assist individuals and families with refugee status. We were confused by Spiderman's third-grade teacher's decision not to retain him, as she had done for one of his Burundian classmates the year before. Though he was below the expected reading level, as most immigrant students are for a number of years after migrating to a new country (Cummins, 1980; Patel, 2013), he had demonstrated progress and his math scores were at grade level. We feared that his family might not understand the testing and placement process and that he might not be placed in the least restrictive environment.

During one of our interviews that spring with Spiderman's former teacher, Mrs. Rescues, she showed me (Anders) an assessment—the Behavior Assessment System for Children—Second Edition (BASC) (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004)—that she had just completed for Spiderman. Nervous about the possibility of a placement for Spiderman in special education without his parents' involvement, I contacted his psychologist, Dr. Wedge, at Global Elixirs to try to set up a meeting so that she could be a part of any decision making regarding special education, and, if his parents consented, be present at any meeting involving his educational placement. The following is an excerpt from that communication.

Dr. Wedge, we would like to update you as soon as possible on the direction the school is taking in regards to Spiderman's educational placement. The school is moving very quickly as we near the end of the school year, and we want the conversations around his education and future to be as inclusive as possible so that all perspectives can be shared at the table . . . at this point the school seems determined to push him from a mainstream classroom into special education. If this happens, we would like to see the least restrictive educational plan in place with input from his family and other professionals around specific goals. BASC-2 is the name of the assessment [Spiderman's former teacher] showed me . . . most importantly, in regards to assessments, the school psychologist mentioned to Jessica [the other researcher] that an IQ test may be given. We have some concerns about the privileges in this assessment, particularly around culture and class, both of which have been documented extensively in education research . . . we want Spiderman to have an experience with these assessments that is culturally sensitive and appropriate. (Fieldnotes, April 2010)

Idealistically, we invested great hope in the possibility of a respectful and inclusive process when we received Dr. Wedge's response. Among other things, she wrote: "I agree that it is essential for the intelligence testing to be discussed given the cultural and language variables." Perhaps, we thought, she would be an advocate and work alongside us to ensure that the least restrictive environment was created for Spiderman. Or, perhaps, we ignored what we already knew about the BASC—that it was intended to "identify pathology."

Within a few days, Spiderman's parents called me (Lester), requesting that I come to the school for a "special meeting." What lay on the desk between us was the BASC (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). I noticed the bright purple edges of the paper and that all the statements required the respondent to circle an answer on a Likert scale ranging from "Often" to "Never." How did one make that decision, I wondered.

A school secretary ushered me into a conference room, where Rukondo and Spiderman's parents were waiting. We greeted each other warmly. After about five minutes, the school psychologist and the ESL teacher entered the room, greeting each of us individually. They knew I was coming, as the family had told them they wanted me there. The school psychologist looked at me and said, "So, we're going to ask them questions from the BASC. The teachers have already filled out theirs and now we need to ask them questions. Okay?" I smiled and said, "I understand. Was that translated already, Rukondo?" Rukondo looked at me and immediately began translating. "Everything really needs to be translated in this meeting, like always," I said, looking directly at the school psychologist. "Oh okay. Yes. She can translate for us. Let me move ahead. This will only take a few minutes. Okay, so, does your son act in a safe manner? Would you say 'never,' 'sometimes,' 'often,' or 'almost always?'" Spiderman's mother looked at Rukondo and whispered something. Rukondo said, "She said that he is always nice and never hurts his siblings."

The school psychologist continued reading such statements as: "He eats too much"; "Eats things that are not food"; "Sees things that are not there"; "Bullies others"; "Eats too little"; "Throws up after eating"; "Says, 'I want to die' or 'I wish I were dead.'" Spiderman's mother answered each question by saying "Never." The psychologist paused at one point and asked why Spiderman's father had shifted his chair and entire body away from the table. Rukondo said, "He says this reminds him of the questions they asked him in the refugee camps. It makes him uncomfortable." The school psychologist said, "Oh. Okay," and then continued reading statements. Suddenly, she stopped and said, "Okay, we have enough information here. I just need to test your son in the next few weeks." Spiderman's mother paused and said, "I have a question. If my son is tested and you decide he goes to that special room, what will happen in the next school building, when he is in high school, in middle school; will he stay in that room for his whole life? What will happen after high school?" The school psychologist said, "By agreeing for him to be tested you are only giving us permission to test him. This doesn't qualify him for special services yet." Spiderman's mother nodded her head and asked, "Will a translator will be there when you test him?" The school psychologist looked at me and said, "Yes, and at our school people don't stay in special education. We try to get them out." I replied, "Really? That seems unique compared to other schools in the district." She nodded and said, "Yes, it is."

Spiderman was tested like all other children being considered for special education. The translator was present at just one of the 30-minute testing sessions. Within four weeks,

Spiderman's family received a letter from the principal at Red Valley. The Red Valley "Support Team" had "recommended" that Spiderman move from third to fifth grade, "skipping fourth grade entirely." Citing Spiderman's peers in fifth grade (though he had two peers rising into fourth grade with him) and an "easier" connection "with students at his own age level," the Red Valley Support Team decided to place him in the fifth grade, knowing that they had documented that he was still learning to read and write at a third-grade level. The letter stated that a meeting to discuss Spiderman's placement in fifth grade had been scheduled for 8:00 a.m. the next day. On such short notice, Spiderman's father could not attend, nor could Spiderman's psychologist; we too were unable to attend. Only Spiderman's mother and Rukondo went to the meeting, and, although his mother had been given a recorder to tape the meeting, she did not use it.

We were told again and again that at the RCS, if a student fails two consecutive nine-week periods, support teams have the authority to place the student in a special class without parental consent. But it was failure delivered by the Support Team, not Spiderman, by eventually officially placing him in special education, where he began the next school year. There, he spent most of his time each day working in the resource room in the east corner of the school's basement. While at Red Valley Elementary School, he remained in special education, never "getting out"—as the psychologist had suggested he would.

### **A Story of Inviting: Marguerite's Voice**

Rukondo, Marguerite, and I (Lester) met just outside the school building, near the steps leading up to the front door. We said hello to one another as we moved toward the elementary school's front desk area.

Today was the day Marguerite was scheduled to meet with the psychologist to talk about her son's "behavioral challenges." She wanted me to be there "to ask questions," she said. I agreed in the hopes that Marguerite's son, Gusama, could get the support she felt he needed. Rukondo was there to translate. Two weeks prior to this meeting, Rukondo had asked me to meet with Marguerite to discuss her rights as a parent. Gusama was being considered for "some kind of special school," she was told. She didn't know much about what the school wanted, as Marguerite didn't speak English and most of the conversations had happened without Rukondo present. Marguerite told me that her son missed his father, who was still living in Tanzania. Gusama had struggled, yelled, and cried at school. "This was all so hard on him," Marguerite said.

We found the front office and each of us checked in. When a front office staff member asked me who I was, I said, "I'm a family friend. Marguerite asked me to come with her today." She looked at Rukondo and said, "Who are you?" Rukondo replied, "I'm the translator. I work for the school district as a translator for the Burundians." The two White women working in the front office looked at each other. One of them said, "We need to verify that you can be here."

We waited for 15 minutes as the school called the central office to verify that we were allowed to be present in the school. I told them, "Marguerite doesn't speak English. She'll need a translator." They quickly replied: "We have to verify that a translator can be here." As we waited, a White middle-aged man walked toward us and introduced himself as the clinical psychologist who would be working with us. Rukondo explained why we were waiting and he apologized, saying, "Schools sometimes need to get permission on funny things. I can't do

anything without a translator, though.” Eventually, the phone rang and we were waved into the hallway with a smile. “You’re allowed to be here,” the secretary said. We thanked her, and followed the clinical psychologist down the stairs toward a small room next to a larger classroom. We all filed in and the psychologist told us to take a seat on the couch facing his desk.

Marguerite, Rukondo, and I sat facing the psychologist. He smiled and began with, “I was asked by the school to conduct an independent evaluation of your son. I have my own psychology practice here in town and occasionally do work for the schools. I’ll be meeting with your son this week, since they said you’ve already agreed to it.” As Rukondo translated, I asked, “Marguerite, did you agree to this already?” She replied, “I don’t know. I think maybe those were the papers I signed when Rukondo wasn’t here to translate.” The psychologist said, “Well, know that I won’t be doing anything without a translator, including meeting with your son. That’s one of my policies.” Marguerite and I smiled. The psychologist then asked, “So, Marguerite, tell me about how the transition to Riverhill has been for you and your children.”

Marguerite spoke quietly for a long time. She shared the struggles of being in the United States with eight children and without their father, who was in Africa. She spoke of working at night while her children slept and the challenges her children faced living in a new country without their father. She spoke of the refugee camps. “Gusama,” she said, “my son, he has been really struggling with not seeing his dad. He says he wants to go back to Africa.”

She ended here. The psychologist, who had been taking notes, looked up and said, “It sounds like more than anything else he misses his dad. Many children who have experienced the type of change that he has, and even the trauma, they struggle for a time. So, I don’t think we need to rush to any decisions about your son. I would like to meet with him and ask him a few questions.” Looking at Rukondo, he said, “I would need you to be there. I want to talk to him in his first language.” Rukondo said, “Of course. You’ll need to ask the school first, I’m sure.” The psychologist smiled and said, “Yes, I will take care of that. Okay, so let’s end things here and come back together after I’ve met with your son. Let’s take it slow. We’ll get him the support he needs. He is going through a lot.” We each thanked him for his time. Weeks later, Marguerite’s son was determined not to need special education; instead, he was invited to participate in regular counseling support.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Although the roles of parent, child, advocate, translator, and specialists were central in each incident, the ways in which each of these incidents proceeded was different. Specifically, differences between psychologists and the ways perspectives of abnormality were interpreted and implemented led to drastically different end results. We do not want to vilify the psychologist who tested Spiderman’s family any more than we want to romanticize the psychologist who worked with Gusama’s family (Krumer-Nevo, 2011; Tamas, 2011). Condemnation alone limits our ability to explain what happened, as resettlement is a complicated process. Refugee status, language acquisition, institutional policies, and practices of the RCS and Global Elixirs all intersect in the everyday experience of Burundian families. It is important to note, however, that although all of the involved professionals were subject to the same force relations that produced a state of power in which they had to respond (Foucault, 1990)—and here that meant responses that took the form of assessing a child’s experience—in

the everyday practice of their work they made two very different decisions. The effects of these decisions cannot be overstated. In one case, a child was placed into a non-inclusive classroom, identified as “disturbed” and “learning disabled,” despite language progress and grade-level achievement in math and the failure of the psychologist to assess him in his primary language. In the other case, the child was viewed as needing more time and emotional support to process his resettlement experience and navigate a new society of settlement and language without the presence of his father.

Across our work, we have advocated for the inclusion of discussions of the special education law and practices in conversations with both parents and teachers, allowing for parents and teachers to carefully and competently support one another across their specializations. We call here for an extension of these competencies to include a consideration of how students’ identities affect their educational placement, particularly at the intersections of language, immigration, nationality, culture, and race. We invite broader understandings of the critical role of advocates in translations that traverse not only linguistic differences, but also academic, bureaucratic, and cultural and geopolitical differences. Advocates shoulder the responsibility of serving as academic, bureaucratic, cultural, and geopolitical translators during the process of testing and placement in ways that can augment a local linguistic translator. Further, we invite teachers, special educators, principals, and psychologists to integrate caution, care, and tentativeness into their everyday decision making about testing for special education, particularly when language differences prevent communication in a shared dialect and therefore force translation. Though educators and specialists are subject to professional discourses, the responses to and enactments of these discourses at the intersection of language and the category of disability require vigilant attentiveness and critical reflection.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms were used throughout to represent both places and people, with two of the participants (Rukondo and Spiderman) selecting their own pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup>Rukondo worked as a professional translator in Riverhill. Riverhill County Schools employed her services for school meetings, as did we for our research team meetings, focus groups and interviews with families. We know from working with Rukondo for three years that one of her greatest struggles in Support Team and special education meetings with Burundian parents was limiting her participation to translation. She understood the power the schools had to track Burundian children from their classrooms into special education. She often shared with us that it had been difficult to not guide the children's parents.



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