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“I was bitten by a scorpion”: Reading in and out of school in a refugee’s life

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A refugee student’s literacy practices are examined. Discrepancies between his in-school and out-of-school literacies highlight the tension he and his teachers experience.

During the fall of 2003, Hayder (pseudonym), a 17-year-old Kurdish refugee from Iraq, told us that the scorpion bite in his neck prevented him from learning to read. He said that he had been a much better student prior to the bite. Hayder told us this story on the day that he read a picture book about animals in a one-on-one guided reading activity. “I was walking in field with my friend in Syria and I fell on the ground and felt a scorpion bite me on my neck. I was sick for a long time. Before, I could learn anything. After. . . it was hard to learn, but I know Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic.”

As we listened to his scorpion bite story in Ms. Kleibel’s (a pseudonym) high school English-language learner (ELL) literacy class, we marveled at Hayder, who was clearly one of the better readers in the room. We asked why this young man was so certain that he could not learn, that he was not well on his way to becoming literate in English? He had just successfully read a passage about scorpions and made a connection to a traumatic event in his past. He had read the word *scorpion* on his own. As we observed Hayder over the next year and a half in and out of school, it became clear that the student we knew in the classroom presented just one reality in this young man’s life. Hayder’s story of the scorpion bite would metaphorically

explain the limitations to success he experienced as a young man coming of age in the United States. Several factors contributed to Hayder’s identity as a learner in a new society: his masculinity as a Kurd, his low socioeconomic status, his experiences with war and survival, his propensity for fighting, his responsibilities at home, his determination to find a job to support his five brothers and parents, and his car troubles.

The purpose of this study is to examine a high school boy’s experiences in an ELL language acquisition program, at home, and in the work place. Within these contexts, we explore Hayder’s participation in literacy events in light of his identity as a Yezidi Kurdish refugee in and out of school.

Our study indicates that reading instruction works for students such as Hayder when certain support structures are in place. Teaching “styles” matter, as does the content of the reading instruction. We found that although teachers attempted to connect Hayder’s literacy learning to the outside work world, Hayder thought that there was little in school that could help him earn a living to support his parents and younger siblings. His preoccupation with the scorpion bite and finding employment hindered his progress in reading, and as his teachers noted in year two of the study, the

consequences of repeated absence and tardiness discouraged him from attending school regularly. Hayder is representative of a new type of immigrant (a refugee) whose home life is incompatible with school expectations, and as such he and others like him are likely to fail and drop out of school.

In the study, we delve into the relationships between this young man's social status as a refugee, the reading instruction with which he engages, and his attempts to stay in school. We draw on research in reading in secondary school settings (e. g. Alvermann, 2001; Beach, 2000; Moje, 2002; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000; Young, 2000) with an emphasis on the sociocultural and socioeconomic theories of success (Bourdieu, 1977; Brandt, 2001; Hull, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2002). Research focused on the nexus of literacy and popular culture (Morrell, 2002; Ogbu, 1982) is salient in helping to explain how youth can "fail" under the best circumstances within the public high school system.

Hayder's arrival in the United States signaled an end to masculinity as it was practiced in Kurdistan and in the refugee campus of Turkey and Syria. Hayder's case illustrates how the flight to an industrialized nation undermined his father's role as head of the family and how Hayder, as a young man, became the antithesis of the independent male Kurdish farmer. In the United States the only work available to Hayder was irregular and infrequent at fast food places. It was not enough to support his family. Overall, his school, work, and home lives were somewhat alien to him as he attempted to negotiate a new sense of self in each of these settings. Our ethnographic analyses are useful in unmasking geopolitical notions of literacy and identity across home, school, and work contexts. An important theoretical dimension of this study is the understanding of the politics of reading in secondary schools (Hinchman & Moje, 1998).

Background

Lincoln, Nebraska, has an approximate population of 220,000 people. It is surrounded by

meat-packing operations, tire factories, and farms. Some towns within a three-hour drive of the city have populations that are 85% Spanish speaking and very few resources for teaching literacy to the growing numbers of students from families that are not print literate in English. Central High School (pseudonym) serves approximately 1,950 students in grades 9–12. According to a school information pamphlet, the high school has about 150 students in ELL classes. The students speak at least 20 different languages. The largest group speaks Spanish and the next four largest groups speak Arabic, Vietnamese, Bosnian, and Kurdish. The total student body is made up of approximately 77% European American students, 10% African American, 5% Asian American, 6% Latin American, and 2% Native American. Nearly 40% of all students receive a free- or reduced-cost lunch.

Nearly 2 million Iraqis fled the fighting during the first Gulf War (January 6, 1991–April 16, 1991). It is estimated that by 1994 the United States had accepted 591,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East, and many of them were resettled in the Midwest. How these and other refugee children adapt to their new social, cultural, and economic setting directly affects the future of the United States.

Hayder's story is an important one because his life is part of a complex web of experiences that connects survival, war, and schooling. It sheds light on what it means to end up in the middle of everywhere, as Pipher (2002) suggested. The Midwest and Great Plains regions of the United States are changing demographically, and schools are facing change as well.

Brief synopsis of methodological perspective and data sources

Hayder's case presents a multitude of areas for query, each affecting his literacy success. We asked three overarching questions that seem particularly

relevant to his situation and the situations of students like him: What does reading look like at the secondary level? What do reading and literacy look like in Hayder's life? Why is Hayder failing out of school and work? Carrying out the study were Loukia, the university researcher (first author), and two advanced preservice teachers, Todd and Tracy (second and third authors), who had taken Loukia's reading methods course.

Loukia wanted to better understand how high school students learned to read and how their teachers accommodated them. Her approach to this study built on prior fieldwork in classrooms and in Middle Eastern communities and elsewhere (Sarroub, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005). Todd and Tracy were both interested in learning to teach reading at the high school level, so Loukia invited them to apply for funding especially for undergraduate students who wanted to conduct research with a mentor. Loukia had conducted classroom observations at Central High prior to Todd and Tracy's joining the project. Todd and Tracy each conducted classroom observations twice a week in four different classrooms, wrote field notes with Loukia, and discussed the research as a group during the two years.

Hayder was, as one of his teachers put it, "a smart young man with lots of problems." He was selected to be a focal student with the help of Ms. Kleibel because of his steady progress in reading (despite his dismal attendance record) and, as she put it, his "strange" experience with a scorpion bite, his low socioeconomic status, and his failure to stay and succeed in school. We systematically carried out observations in two of Hayder's ELL Literacy and language acquisition classes during the fall of 2002 and the spring and fall of 2003.

Given the apparent cultural constraints regarding men and women in Hayder's home life, we decided that Todd would visit Hayder's home, and that he would shadow Hayder for entire days, from morning until evening. This gave us the opportunity to understand Hayder's perceptions from a male perspective, thus avoiding the cultural constraints Loukia's presence would have imposed in public and private spaces. Hayder was

"shadowed" at school, and his various literacy practices were coded along with those of his peers in his reading classes. Classroom sessions were videotaped over the course of one semester to capture oral interactions and responses to various print texts. Reading assessments were conducted with Hayder to determine approximate reading levels. When we first met him, he could decode and comprehend printed text at a second-grade level, and he had no trouble communicating with us in English. Throughout the study we looked for literacy events (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000) to help us explain Hayder's engagement in various activities.

Hayder

We first met Hayder in the ELL Literacy class. Ms. Kleibel, then in her third year of teaching this class, was part of a district-wide professional development grant whose aims were to help 4th through 12th-grade students with limited formal schooling. The growing numbers of refugee students arriving from Vietnam, Iraq, the Sudan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere with few or no experiences with print mobilized teachers to engage with one another about the teaching of reading. Ms. Kleibel, for example, met regularly with elementary, middle, and high school reading, math, and technology teachers as well as K-12 media specialists as part of a funded grant throughout the academic year and reviewed reading strategies that she would then implement in her classroom. During the summers, the teachers offered a summer school option to students with limited formal schooling and coached them one-on-one or in small groups.

Ms. Kleibel adapted Cunningham and Allington's (1999) "making words" and "word wall" activities; she created centers in her classroom; and with our help and the help of paraprofessionals and high school student helpers, she encouraged students to partake in guided reading activities. For example, both Loukia and Todd guided

students individually or in pairs through picture books purchased for guided reading with grant funds or checked out from the public library, and it was during such an activity that we met Hayder.

Our first impression of Hayder was that he was a quiet student with a big smile. He did not say much, but when he said hello upon walking into the room his mouth would creep up into a lopsided smirk. Hayder was pleasant, upbeat, intelligent, and personable, yet, at times, he was frustrated and discouraged by the slow process of learning English. He told us that he felt lonely because of his isolation from the other students. The more we learned about Hayder the more he seemed compelled to talk to Todd, although Todd made no effort to seek him out from the other students. Even during instruction, Hayder would periodically want to talk to Todd, sometimes asking questions about the language activities in class and, at other times, relating an event from his life to the texts he read. Hayder became a "natural" case study for us.

We characterized Hayder as a storyteller. Sometimes he would mumble through events in such a way that Loukia or Todd could only make out bits and pieces of what he was trying to say. At other times, he clearly expressed himself. He would tell stories about his uncles or father in Iraq. He would talk about events and friends at work. He talked about why he could not remember the different languages he claimed he could once speak – Arabic, Kurdish, and some Turkish. At the beginning we did not know what to make of Hayder's stories, but the more time that Todd spent with Hayder, the more we began to understand that these stories were integral to his identity – a male, refugee, ELL student who seemed to be trying to understand how the world worked in the United States.

Hayder is a Kurdish Yezidi refugee, and when we first met him he had lived in the United States for three years. He lived with his mother, father, and five younger brothers. Another brother still lives in Kurdistan. The family is poor, and this was evident during our visits to their home during the

two years we followed Hayder. The family's most prized possession seemed to be the television, which was turned on most of the time.

Hayder's parents were not employed. His father lost his job because of a fall at work that now required him to use a crutch. There was always a group of men in Hayder's home, and they would sit and smoke and watch TV and talk about politics. None had jobs. Hayder told us that he and his father had worked hard as farmers in Iraq and the refugee camps, but now they could not find work. Hayder's parents could not speak English, and they were unable to read and write in any language.

About his own sense of self as a refugee and a student, Hayder expressed confusion. He would often say he was "confused" when talking about himself and certain life events, especially those he experienced in Iraq and the refugee resettlement camps. He had no trouble recalling information he learned in school, but he did say that he was always in trouble. The "confusion," compounded by his very calm demeanor and frequent unstressed intonation and drawn out words when speaking prompted Hayder's teachers to say that Hayder seemed "foggy," "groggy," or "out of it." Hayder attributed that confusion to the scorpion bite. He had a scar on his neck that he said was from the bite. Initially the scorpion bite was a frequent story that Hayder told, reporting that the effects from the bite were memory and language loss and the inability to concentrate. Hayder even spoke about going to the doctor to get "medicine" for his bite. The scorpion bite was a central narrative in his school life and in his relationship with us and with his teachers. None of us who listened knew how to help him with the long-term effects of the scorpion bite.

While Hayder's religion seemed central to his identity – he didn't come to school for Kurdish celebrations and holidays – his knowledge of his family's religious practices was limited and often times he was unable to articulate his beliefs. We were surprised by his inability to explain his religion to us, and we suspect this had less to do with his ability to speak in English than it did with a

certain reticence around this topic and the marginalization he had experienced both in Iraq and the United States, for he could talk at length and in detail about girls or fights. Except for one occasion, during which Hayder compared and contrasted Christian, Muslim, and Yezidi traditions, our own knowledge about the Yezidi grew from research on the Web and in the library. We learned that the followers of the Yezidi religion number approximately 60,000 in Iraq and Syria and 200,000 worldwide. Their beliefs are a complicated mixture of Islamic, Gnostic, Jewish, and Shamanistic elements. Yezidi tradition is strictly oral and consists of prayers, songs, and hymns in the Kurdish language.

After his family and people's persecution by Saddam Hussein's policies to bring Kurds in line with his regime, Hayder's only formal education took place in refugee resettlement camps in Turkey and Syria prior to arrival in the United States. Hayder has an ear for languages, but within the socioeconomic class system he inhabited literacy was not important until he was sent to school in the refugee camps and then in the United States.

As we explored Hayder's life in and out of school, Hayder told us stories. They all reflect a rather stereotypical gendered view of what it means to be a young man, and although they do not address all of the complexities of his life they are insightful. The recurring themes among the stories he told were work, cars, girls, and fighting. Hayder was preoccupied by what he called "trouble" in his life in the forms of fights, car repairs, and speeding tickets. When he first arrived in the United States, he spoke about the many fights he had with other people because he was "mad" at them. Hayder had trouble controlling his anger at work and at school and was frequently suspended for getting into fights and "beating people up." He also dealt with unpaid speeding tickets, a lack of auto insurance, several accidents, financing car repairs, and making payments to people for liability. He received many tickets for speeding and had numerous unpaid ones.

Finding employment was a priority that consumed Hayder's free time. He was constantly filling out applications at fast food restaurants and going to interviews, yet he had no success in securing steady employment. He was frustrated with the job search process and could not understand why he could not get a job, even though he had previously been employed at two other restaurants, working 40 hours a week. The inability to find employment weighed heavily on Hayder because he needed money to pay off the debt resulting from his car problems. He even thought he'd join the army as a way to help his family and jokingly said, "and go on vacation to like Iraq and Afghanistan" (Field notes, November 6, 2003).

The themes of fighting, work, his car, and girls seemed to be the center of Hayder's social life. While he spoke about these things in isolated ways, there were also times when fighting, girls, and work became connected. He was beaten at work and the police attempted to protect him, but he continued to openly challenge male coworkers who criticized him and his relationships with girls. Although Hayder talked about girls every time we met with him, he also said that he did not have a job or money and therefore did not want a girlfriend. Because of his slight build and good looks, he had no trouble attracting attention from young women, and the very heart of his masculinity was battered as his male coworkers accused him of not being masculine enough. He would lift weights and do stomach crunches during his work breaks to prove that he was strong, but this elicited jeers and insults, and Hayder fought back physically.

Religion, and life in a fog

We were curious about Hayder's participation in religious and cultural practices and how he negotiated these with his teachers, given that he was not able to articulate Yezidi traditions and holiday practices in English to them. Teachers would often ask him about the holidays during which he missed class, and he was not able

to name them. Hayder's experience in not being able to talk about holidays or cultural matters with his teachers was not unique to him. Other Iraqi and Kurdish students whose traditions, cultures, and religions did not fit within the "mainstream" knowledge that is commonly available about Christianity, Judaism, and Islam experienced a dissonance, in part because they could not find the appropriate ways to describe them in English and in part because the teachers themselves did not have a set of references about the Yezidi or Wahhabi religious practices, for instance, that they could draw on to understand their students. In other words, neither the students nor the teachers could find a common frame of reference for talking about the "unusual" events that occurred at home that influenced participation at school. In Hayder's case and from the school's perspective, the holidays for which he stayed at home became truanancies.

Hayder's teachers often noted to us when Hayder was "confused" and would often report that he was "out of it." At times teachers were concerned that Hayder was involved in drugs because of his tardiness to class. In one e-mail message, Ms. Sajac (pseudonym) explained, "A prognosis for Hayder is tougher. He's been late about 5 times, and each time puts him a little deeper in a fog. . . . So that isn't so good." The same teacher wrote in a second message, "Maybe we've touched on this before. His foginess, that is. . . . Being late and absent puts any kid a step behind." Ms. Kleibel noted that Hayder blamed his forgetfulness and troubles in life on the scorpion bite and that she did not know what to make of that because he seemed to do well in reading when he was in school.

We attempted to answer the "drugs" question more definitively because our observations of Hayder showed no indication of use in or out of school and we were concerned by his teachers' views of his behavior. When we asked him, Hayder explained that he had never been forgetful in the past, and that he had studied and spoken several languages before the scorpion bite incident. His sometimes red eyes served to confirm teachers' suspicions about Hayder. During our observations and interactions with Hayder, we too witnessed his red eyes. Todd observed Hayder

washing his face when he left class to use the restroom:

I asked Hayder if he splashed his face with water every time he went to the restroom. Hayder said, "Sometimes, and it makes my eyes red. That is why teachers are always asking me if I do drugs because I splash my face with water." (Field notes, December 16, 2003)

Hayder was a smart student who made many breakthroughs in school, but those accomplishments were usually overshadowed by his life outside of school. He dropped out of school on two separate occasions, and when he was in school his attendance was sporadic, which led to in school and out-of-school suspensions that ultimately kept him out of the classroom even more. The inconsistency in his dedication to school and his red, bleary eyes affected his grades and his progress. We were mindful of his teachers' perceptions of him as a drug user, but to our knowledge this was not the case, and we have evidence to present of Hayder's home reading habits that could explain the red eyes and foggy behavior.

Literacy in context

Yes, Hayder is in my Level 2 ELL class. I have known him for a long time. He was first in my class 2 years ago, in Level 1. At that time, he missed lots of days and wasn't really tuned in much at all. He did behave and do his work; he was just not there much and eventually he dropped out. The same thing happened last year. He was in my Level 1 Reading class. It was 2nd period, at 8:00, and he just couldn't get there. He always had excuses: trains, car problems, etc. He made up work as requested, but eventually started missing more and more until he dropped out.

This year he certainly has appeared to be more serious about school. He has been here and been on time until today. He was absent, so that concerns me. Hopefully, there is a good reason he missed class today. I went to California for my son's wedding, so I have really only worked with him this year for less than two

weeks. So far this year, he has been much more appropriate in classroom attitude and work habits than the last two years. He has taken one Hampton Brown test on which he scored 68. I give the students 10 extra points on their first-ever Hampton Brown test, because the format is often different than they have had before. So his score was 78, a C. (Ms. Telhee, pseudonym; e-mail correspondence, October 10, 2003)

So far, we have described who Hayder is and how we came to understand his experiences as a student and refugee in the United States. In this section of the article we address how he negotiated reading in and out of school, how he dealt with school and "life" literacy. In school, Hayder's literacy acquisition was guided by a high school early reading curriculum. Out of school he was functionally literate, using reading and writing for specific goals or outcomes. The two classes in which we observed him on a regular basis were Ms. Kleibel's ELL Literacy class (which she called Basic Reading) and Ms. Sajak's ELL Level 2 Social Studies classes (which focused on cultures and narrative texts), each of which had 6 to 10 students. As Ms. Kleibel remarked,

The ELL Literacy class was, by definition, based on individual assessment and selection of materials for each student [who had had very little formal schooling experience or literacy instruction in any language]; the class size was very small so more communication with the teacher was possible. A Level 2 class [addressed] the needs of students without special needs as well as unique [cultural and linguistic] issues.

These teachers were part of a cohesive, collegial, and collaborative group who worked well with one another and enjoyed the guidance of a strong and innovative leader. They met often and worked together along two key dimensions: the reading component of academic life in high school and the social life component within the United States. As we mentioned above, Ms. Kleibel was also part of a district-wide professional development group that was learning how to implement some early reading strategies in classrooms.

Ms. Kleibel's instruction focused on spelling, vowel sounds and rhymes, syllables, making

words, and independent and guided reading. She liked to have her students read a variety of picture books or informational texts that she had checked out from the public library or that she bought with grant funds. Ms. Kleibel was very direct in her instruction, and she had everything planned out each day. The students came into the classroom knowing what to expect—the beginning of class would be spent making words, where students would be given a set number of letters to spell out a word provided by the teacher. After the making-words activity, there would be a lesson on rhyming, vowels, or some other phonics-like reading instruction. The remaining class period would be focused on individual reading or group reading (sometimes choral reading), where the students put into practice the skills that they had learned in the making-words activity and the other phonics-like instruction.

Ms. Kleibel was a reflective teacher, who examined her instruction and made modifications based on her perceptions about what students needed. During the year of observations in her class, she made modifications by breaking students into groups for more one-on-one attention, having the aide work with one group while she worked with another and then switching half way through the class period. She would often return from her professional development group with lists of ideas that she attempted to implement in her classroom. She was aware of her students' ability levels and would talk about the varying levels of progress that she saw her students making. She assigned homework related to the making-words activities and encouraged students to read at home by letting them borrow books from her classroom. As a result of her constant reflection and adaptation, and in addition to her structured instruction, she was strategic in her teaching style. Figure 1 provides an example of how she guided one lesson about a reading passage. Ms. Kleibel guided Hayder's reading by making an analogy, and Hayder showed that he understands the concept of analogy by rhyming another example. (Please see Abedi, 2005, for a comprehensive analysis of assessment of ELL students.)

Figure 1. Sample interaction about a reading passagePassage from *Is Your Mama a Llama?*

"Is your mama a llama?" I asked my friend Fred.
 "No, she is not," is what Freddy said.
 "She has a long neck and white feathers and wings.
 I don't think a llama has all of those things."
 "Oh," I said. "You don't need to go on.
 I think that your mama must be a . . . SWAN!"
 (Guarino, 1997, pp. 7-10)

Classroom interaction

Ms. Kleibel tells Hayder to read the passage. Hayder reads "swan" as "swain." Ms. Kleibel points out that the last word of every sentence rhymes and makes the same sound as the last word in the previous sentence. Ms. Kleibel then tells Hayder that *swan* rhymes with *on*. Then Kleibel tells Hayder to read part two again but with energy. Hayder smiles and reads it again. When he reads it again and gets to the word *llama* he says, "Llama mama." Everyone laughs and Hayder smiles.
 (Field notes, February 11, 2003)

Hayder flourished in Ms. Kleibel's class. He was able to make connections in literacy, pulling together reading, spelling, rhyming, and syllables. When he struggled, Ms. Kleibel pointed out rhyming patterns that helped Hayder identify and learn words. Although Hayder did not always attend Ms. Kleibel's class on a regular basis toward the end of the year, he greatly improved in reading and was considered ready for Level 2 half-way through the academic year. However, his absences held him back. Ms. Kleibel commented that she often combined listening to Hayder talk about life outside of school with setting certain limits with him. At times she clearly redirected his conversation during instruction. She did this when he began to repeat himself or "get stuck" on a topic from his past, such as the scorpion bite. She followed this strategy because some of Hayder's conversation style characteristics (repetition of the same stories with increased emphasis on why he could not learn) would not be an asset in work settings, something important to him. As Ms. Kleibel noted, Hayder did not seem offended at this type of intervention or honesty alongside the reading instruction with which he engaged.

While Ms. Sajac's academic style was very different from that of Ms. Kleibel, the students liked her genial approach to teaching and to them. This was a class in which students were expected to work more independently, and while some met this challenge successfully, others, like Hayder and Karima (pseudonym), another Kurdish ELL student, struggled. Lessons were briefly presented at the beginning of class, and the majority of class time was spent on independent seatwork consisting of worksheets that were sometimes collected for a grade, or at other times the answers were given to the entire class. This type of independent work did not always hold students accountable for language learning, and the students would often copy one another and talk aloud as they shared answers. We observed Hayder attempt to join class discussion on more than one occasion when he attended school, but he finally gave up. As in Ms. Kleibel's class, Hayder's attendance was sporadic, and our sense is that Ms. Sajac, who did her best, thought that Hayder still needed to make an effort to be there and to participate consistently. Hayder made little progress in reading and writing in the class.

As with Ms. Sajak's class the social atmosphere of Ms. Kleibel's class was welcoming, and she made a social connection with Hayder. She knew him well and would often ask him about his family, his job situation, or his recent car problems. She took an interest in Hayder's life events, at times offering suggestions, advice, and support. Ms. Kleibel said that she coached him as to when to stop asking questions on any given topic in class because that would help him during job interviews. She was what Pipher (2002) called a cultural broker—for example, helping Hayder with the school attendance appeals process or giving advice regarding car trouble and police officers. The following is an example of Ms. Kleibel's help to Hayder.

"Oh Hayder, before you leave, I have the answer to your appeal to the attendance committee. Come here." Ms. Kleibel walks to the back of the room and Hayder follows her. Ms. Kleibel says, "You can still pass your classes as long as your teachers are willing to let you make up the work. So, if you want to make up the work in my class you can still pass. Right now you have an F, but if you do the work we can change that." Hayder says that he wants to do the work. Ms. Kleibel said, "Now Hayder, don't get discouraged if there are other teachers that won't let you make up work. Don't just quit. Keep working hard and stay in school." (Field notes, December 17, 2003)

Hayder would frequently stay after class to speak with Ms. Kleibel about school and his job. Hayder reported that he liked his teachers because they were nice, and that he knew he should attend school more regularly. We understood Ms. Sajak's frustrations. On several occasions when we observed in her class, Hayder was absent or late. However, we noted some missed opportunities to respond to and teach him, to encourage him to return and continue the work of learning to read and write in English. At the same time, no one teacher can be responsible for the choices Hayder made about school, and thus Hayder presents a dilemma to us and to his teachers.

Out of school Hayder was focused on what was important to him. He told us that he did not like reading and said that he did not read at home. Yet

he knew that practicing reading as much as possible was key to his success in school, but he did not want to read what was not interesting to him. Despite this reticence toward reading, Hayder was dedicated to learning new words and reading outside of school, but only if he saw that the reading would lead to a specific benefit or outcome. "Any words that I want to learn I can learn to spell and learn to write but if I don't want, then I'm not going to learn."

Hayder would read for specific purposes outside of school. He would read billboards while driving, signs on buildings, instructions and messages at an ATM, and messages and directions while playing video games. He said that it was easy for him to learn words outside of school, especially when he was frequently exposed to them. He would make an extra effort to learn words that he felt were important to know. The example that follows is one in which Hayder and Todd went through the drive-through at a McDonald's restaurant:

He said that when he goes to McDonald's he likes to have "that white stuff that you put on sandwiches." Hayder told me [Todd] that he did not know what it was called and asked me what it was. He said it was "sour cream, like Ranch dressing." Hayder drove up to the next window to pick up the food. I asked Hayder if he was talking about mayonnaise. Hayder said, "Yes, how do you say it again?" I repeated, "mayonnaise" for Hayder and he repeated "mayonnaise" five times. Then he said, "I need to write it down so I remember." Hayder looked around his car and then pulled down the visor and got out a receipt and a pencil and wrote *mayonaz* on the back of the receipt. He got the food from the second window and handed it to me and told me to put the drinks in the cup holders. Hayder then asked the woman if he could get some mayonnaise. (Field notes, March 12, 2003)

On a different day, as Hayder and Todd drove aimlessly around town, Hayder parked the car facing west toward an intersection. Hayder stared in the distance and said that he did not like long words and said "they are the hardest" for him to learn. "Like pharmacy over there," he pointed

through the windshield and across the street. On the side of the building, in big red letters, was printed *pharmacy*. Todd asked Hayder how he learned the big word *pharmacy*, and Hayder replied, "By seeing them a lot so I learn them."

Hayder read words everywhere he went, and he did so with an avid interest that belied his teachers' perceptions of him being in a fog. Along with writing every new word in phonetic approximation as he did with *mayonaz*, Hayder would often read the words at the bottom of the television screen as they scrolled past in closed caption mode. Then, in school, he would talk about the films that he watched or ask questions about something that he had seen on TV. The television was an important tool in learning new words. On one occasion, when Todd arrived early in the morning to accompany him to school, he found Hayder busy playing a video game from the 1980s. Hayder read the instructions on the screen as he proceeded from one level to the next in the game. This is one game of three in a series; it allows players to select a box, the contents of which will "help you on your way." There are battles at the end of each level.

I [Todd] sat in the basement and watched Hayder play the video game. There were times when he would finish a level of the game and a screen would come up that would have a written message on it. The first time it said, "The king has been transformed, it is your job to find him and change the king back." Hayder sat there for a while, quietly, looking at the TV screen. He seemed to be reading what was on the screen. Hayder shouted, "Oh it is terrible, the king has been captured." Then the screen went to another level in the game and Hayder said, "Now going to go to war." He finished another level of the video game and another screen came up with a written message. Hayder read this message aloud, "Pick a box. Its contents will help you on your way." He then continued to play the video game. (Field notes, November 18, 2003)

When Todd asked Hayder when he had started playing, he replied that he had never gone to bed; he had played and read the screen all night. His eyes were bloodshot and he was reluctant to

leave the TV and lose his score. On other days when Hayder played the video game all night, he arrived late at school because he drove his younger brothers to the middle school. On the day that Todd shadowed him, Hayder's brothers decided to sleep in and Todd and Hayder were late. Some of Hayder's teachers thought he was "out of it" and on drugs, and unfortunately his sleepless state was convincing evidence, as it had been on prior occasions when he stayed up to play video games.

Hayder also read avidly at work. At his second job in a fast food restaurant, he learned to use the cash register, and he asked the manager for a training manual or book about the register that he could take home to read and study. He was told that such a book did not exist. Hayder perceived reading to be relevant to doing his job well, and he lamented the lack of written instruction. Unlike the women in Hull's (2001) study, who were given reading and writing tests that were not all related to feeding forms into a machine, Hayder found that being able to read and respond to the menus, the cash register, pay checks, and notices on the bulletin board at work was key to his survival in the work place. He also knew that for him, the sole breadwinner in his family, literacy was vital to his family's well-being. Unfortunately, after being fired from two jobs for being late "just one time," he had difficulty finding a new job elsewhere, and following the attacks of September 11, 2001, he suspected that his employers had tried to find a reason to fire him because other workers had arrived late on occasion and had not been fired.

It was clear that Hayder's literacy practices were enacted differently. Success was mediated by the support available (i.e., a teacher who provided guidance and instruction) and tasks that allowed for an obvious and necessary connection being literacy and a job well done. At home, Hayder's parents could not read or write in their native language, and they placed a high value on Hayder's learning to read and write in English. Hayder always said that his parents wanted him to stay in school, yet there seemed to be a lack of emphasis or importance placed on attending school on

a regular basis—both for Hayder and his other brothers. They needed him to be in an adult-like role, to support them and their family. At school, Hayder was determined to understand information and would frequently ask questions of his teachers in order to comprehend what was being taught. But he rarely, if ever, completed homework outside of school and there existed a disconnection between the expectations of academic learning at school, and his family's engagement with school. The closest approximation of school-like literacy practices occurred in the workplace, where Hayder actively sought to "study" the manuals if they were available.

Hayder's ultimate goal was to be happy, have a job, and make money so that he could care for himself and his family. School was important to Hayder as long as it could provide the means to obtain a job. Ms. Sajac and Ms. Kleibel's classes provided opportunities to make such connections. With Ms. Sajac, he chatted occasionally about his life outside of school, and in Ms. Kleibel Hayder found a teacher who understood the needs of a refugee. For example, when she discovered his interest in cars and repairing them, she provided him with books about cars during guided reading instruction. She was also someone who inquired into his life and his problems. This was unusual in this young man's life, and given his absences and tardiness it kept him connected to school life, but not for long. The scorpion bite became a metaphor of failure both in and out of school.

Reading for mayonnaise

We certainly cannot end this article with the hopeless metaphorical reality of a scorpion bite to explain away students dropping out of school. For 2003–2004, U. S. Department of Education data show a count of 3.8 million students in public schools that have limited English skills (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The United States has agreed to accept refugees such as Hayder and his family, and schools must be better prepared to teach refugee students until they

find ways to make a life for themselves. Although we cannot address all the ways in which schools, families, and communities might help one another in this endeavor, we posit a definition of literacy that crosses barriers between schools, families, and workplaces. Literacy is fluid; it changes from context to context, task to task. Reading means knowing that a *scorpion* bit you and learning to say and write *mayonnaise*.

Teaching reading at the secondary level can be difficult, cumbersome, and challenging. Often, secondary students are reluctant to read, bored with the monotony of their school lives and distracted by their out-of-school responsibilities, obligations, or social pastimes. In the case of Hayder, his many responsibilities—having to drive his brothers to school, earn money, repair his car, take care of his parents' needs, pay bills, and get along with people who provoked him to fight—all made him into a less than perfect student. Many teachers enter the reading classroom with ambitious agendas, only to finish the first school week doubting their abilities to teach reading and turn high school aged students into good readers. Often, students are assigned a task or project to complete, and there is little reflection about or articulation of each student's learning process or the steps involved in completing the task.

Because students have little exposure to across-content understanding of their work, literacy instruction can be important and meaningful if students see value in reading, and if teachers make explicit connections to those realities and validate students' ideas. As Hawkins (2004) noted, "we must rid ourselves of the assumption that good teaching results in language learning and academic success" (p. 21). Hawkins pointed out that negotiating new vocabulary and grammatical structures goes hand in hand with sociocultural competence. In secondary classrooms that focus on reading instruction, this is difficult because there are not readily available curricular materials that address the social and academic needs of youth. Yet we observed Ms. Kleibel and Ms. Sajac make intellectual and compassionate connections to their students, and these are key dimensions that characterize teaching on a good day. Teachers

can help students embrace school literacy by supporting the multiple literacies students already practice, by making across-text and across-content connections, and by seeing literacy as a communicative tool and entry into a special dybamic community that relates to student's in- and out-of school lives.

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