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## Understanding Childhoods In-Between: Sudanese refugee children's transition from home to preschool

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**ABSTRACT** Canada receives over 30,000 refugees each year, approximately 10% of whom are under five years of age. While to varying degrees the factors influencing the experiences of adult refugees have been identified and researched, the experiences of young refugee children 'living in-between' has only recently begun to capture researchers' interest. This article considers what the experiences are of young refugee children in their day-to-day living between languages and cultures as they make a transition between home and Canadian early childhood settings. More specifically, the question addressed is: What roles do refugee children play in mediating the host culture for their parents in the hybrid place created by play? The authors propose that play in early childhood does serve, for refugees experiencing resettlement, as a site of cultural mediation, contestation, and identity negotiation. An analysis of three Sudanese refugee mothers and their four-year-old sons' use of common early childhood artefacts – wooden building blocks – is used to demonstrate how young refugee children who experience child care outside their home for the first time not only learn to 'be a preschooler', but learn to 'interpret' this role to their parents.

### Introduction

Of the 192 member states of the United Nations, 16 maintain refugee resettlement quotas (UNHCR, 2006a). Canada, as one of these countries, receives over 30,000 refugees each year, approximately 10% of whom are under five years of age (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). Structural, personal, and community factors, along with reasons for migration (movement from one country to another) all interplay to determine the settlement experiences of these families and individuals (Bloch, 2002). In examining the settlement services offered in Canada, the Canadian Council for Refugees (1998) indicates that social, economic, cultural and political spheres all play an interconnected role in determining the speed and fluidity with which refugees settle and integrate. Furthermore, 'personal characteristics such as gender, age, skill level, education, and past experiences all play a role' (p. 13).

While to varying degrees the factors influencing the experiences of adult refugees have been identified and researched, the experiences of young refugee children 'living in-between' has only recently begun to capture researchers' interest. What is the experience of childhoods interrupted by resettlement? In particular, what are the experiences of young refugee children in their day-to-day living between languages and cultures as they make a transition between home and Canadian early childhood settings? The state of standing on the threshold, or of being 'betwixt and between', is defined in anthropological literature as liminality, or being in a liminal space (Turner, 1969, p. 94). Further, Turner describes liminality as a condition in which individuals are stripped of their ordinary identities, social roles, and positions. Although the state of 'betweenness' is not exclusive

to the experiences of migration but rather is part of the normal developmental process of each individual (Turner, 1969), the concept of liminality can be seen as particularly applicable to describing refugees' condition in the post-migration phase. If we use the three-part process that accompanies every change in place, social position, and age of an individual as proposed by Turner (Eksner & Orellana, 2005) to understand the individual changes occurring in refugees upon their arrival to their host country, we can assume that first, the individual experiences separation from his or her previous social structure and set of cultural conditions; second (the *limen*), he or she experiences lack of membership in established societal categories; and third, the individual aggregates into a new status. According to Turner, on the symbolic plane, liminal transitions are often represented as 'death, darkness, invisibility, and being in the womb' (Turner, 1969, as cited in Eksner & Orellana, 2005, p. 177).

However, the representation of liminality described above was framed in an essentialist model of identity linked to the then dominant discourse of the 'deficiency' of immigrants in general and immigrant children in particular. The more current (postmodern) discourse introduces the concept of *hybridity* (Hall, 1996; Hall & du Gay, 1996) and suggests the in-between time of transitioning from one's homeland to a new location as rich in complexity, a time of mediation, contestation, and negotiation. We side with recent notions of liminality as a 'third space', a dialectical time, a time of hybridity, and for clarity use the term hybridity when we refer to this current notion of liminality.

The term hybridity describes the idea that immigrants and ethnic minorities are not merely caught in a deadlock between cultures; rather this state of 'in-betweenness' is a positive, socially productive historical process in which new cultural practices are forged in their own right. (Eksner & Orellana, 2005, p. 178)

While one might agree that the adult refugee is involved in this complex identity negotiation over a lifetime, some might question the applicability of this position with respect to children. It has long been held that young people adapt easily to the new culture and quickly assimilate; that they simply pass through the doorway from one culture to the other. Fantino & Colak (2001), however, question this view and suggest the reason we do not hear more about the complex nature of identity negotiation among and within newcomer young people is that we simply do not listen. Though recent works are beginning to hear the voices of children and youth experiencing migration (Knörr, 2005; Adams & Kirova, 2007), still very little is known about how the youngest members of society, preschool-age children, negotiate their identities in their in-between position. As Knörr (2005) puts it, 'little is known about children's particular understanding of (migrant) life' (p. 14) despite the fact that 'children take on important roles in mediating between their world of origin and the host society' (p. 15). It is through school, kindergarten, backyards, playgrounds, and other 'child-specific institutions and contact zones' (Hirschfeld, 2002, p. 624) that children become involved in the social life of their host societies, and acquire new cultural knowledge so 'exceptionally well' (Hirschfeld, 2002, p. 615). Yet the life of very young refugee children and their role in the acculturation process of their families continues to escape adult understanding.

This article is an attempt to demonstrate, through data gathered from three refugee mother-child dyads, how positions and culturally defined identities are changed while negotiating roles during block play episodes. We suggest that play offers a hybrid space in which young children and their parents/mothers are engaged in practices that merge different cultural forms into a 'bricolage' (Hebdige, 1979, p. 102), and allow, through contestation, new identities to emerge.

### Is Childhood Being In-Between?

Before attempting any further investigation of young Sudanese refugee children's childhood as being in-between cultures and languages, we need to examine our preconceived notions of childhood. In doing so, we are inevitably faced with a problem – every adult has the experience of being a child, and thus 'we already know too much' (van Manen, 1990, p. 46) about the phenomenon of childhood. In acknowledging this difficulty, we suggest first taking a 'naïve look' (Barritt et al, 1983) at our shared notion of childhood as reflected in a dictionary definition of childhood. *Random House Webster* (1990), for example, tells us that childhood is '1. a state or a period of being a child, or 2. the early stage in the existence of something' (p. 235). Apparently, if

we use the first, contemporary meaning of childhood provided above, we cannot define childhood without knowing what *child* is. However, in defining *child* the dictionary fails to give us any sense of what this might be like. Instead, the description provided as 'a person between birth and full growth; a young boy or a girl' (p. 235) relies solely on physiological terms. Nevertheless, being *between* seems to be essential in the definition of *child*. Although birth is a fixed moment, full growth is not, and thus it is less clearly definable as an end. Even if it were, one needs to ask, *the end of what?* Of a person's being between, or the end of growth? Whatever full growth as an end of a person's being a child seems to indicate in this definition, we can now apply it to the definition of childhood. Childhood then is defined as the state or time of being a person (a girl or a boy) between birth and full growth. In this case, moving *between* more or less clearly defined points of existence seems to be essential in defining not only *child*, but also *childhood*. As in the definition of *child*, however, the definition of *childhood* includes nothing that alludes to the nature of this state or time of being 'a person between' other than it is between two points defined with a different level of clarity. The process of *moving between* implies time: the time one needs to go from birth to full growth. So, is childhood a time, or is it the moving itself? How does a person move if there is no place to move from or to? Is birth a place as well as a time? What is the importance of our birthplace as a beginning of our journey between?

Refugee preschool children are doubly in-between. They are in-between with respect to their transition between the home and new culture, as well they are in-between as having not yet arrived at the next phase of human development; they are 'pre'. Early childhood is for the most part considered a time of getting ready, a time of preparation for the structured learning phase of school. A common goal of many early childhood programs (e.g. Rhymes That Bind, Early Head Start, Parent and Tot, Stay and Play, and Head Start) that might otherwise have very different practices is to prepare children for their future school success. Early childhood is considered a time of getting ready through various programs, with each program being the program that gets children ready for the next program. It seems that, because children are seen as 'incomplete' and thus in need of further development, the image of the 'poor child' or the 'deficit child' (as cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 66) leads to early childhood programs and institutions being 'understood as a means of social intervention, capable of protecting society against the effects of poverty, inequality, insecurity and marginalization' (as cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 66).

This deficit model of childhood, paired with the deficit model created by the early conceptualization of liminality as a void space, can easily lead to describing immigrant and refugee children as helpless victims, dependent on skilled intervention of the early childhood professional whose job is to 'fill the child up' with the knowledge he or she needs in order to be a successful member of the host society's school system. We put forward that because more recently early childhood is understood as much more than a preparatory phase (e.g. Prout & James, 1990; Mayall, 1996), and because young children are not simply 'our future', but, rather, are active participants and citizens in society in the present, immigrant and refugee children play an active role not only in acquiring new cultural knowledge but also in shaping accordingly their relationships with their parents.

In this article, we use examples from a larger study to demonstrate how for young refugee children who experience child care outside of their homes for the first time, living in the present means not only learning to 'be a preschooler', but it also means learning to 'interpret' this meaning to their parents. In other words, as children learn how to behave in culturally relevant ways in the host country and use particular play materials that are majority culture artefacts, they also mediate these new cultural ways of using these artefacts in their interactions with their mothers. The specific question we address in this article is: What roles do refugee children play in mediating the host culture for their parents in the hybrid space created by play? For the purposes of this article, we look at children's and their mothers' transition into the culture of developmentally appropriate practice adopted by most preschool settings in North America in general and the research site in western Canada in particular. We propose that play in early childhood within such settings does serve, for refugees experiencing resettlement, as a site of cultural mediation, contestation, and identity negotiation. We show here how this occurs between three Sudanese children and their mothers.

### Learning through Play Contextualized

In suggesting that play has a particular place in refugee children's experiences of immigration and acculturation, we would like to distinguish our view of play from the western conceptions based predominantly on developmental theory (Neumann, 1971; Bergen, 1988; Johnson et al, 1999; Cohen, 2006). The history of play in the western context has been well documented (Lowenfeld, 1969; Herron & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Bruner et al, 1976), as has the role of play in the evolution of early childhood care and education (Bloch & Choi, 1990; Spodek & Saracho, 1991). Furthermore, the study of play has become a well-established field of research. Today, all introductory child development and life-span development textbooks discuss play, and provide an overview of classical and modern theories of play. Within the study of early childhood care and education, courses on play theory and practice dominate, and there is a great deal of literature designed to accompany the discipline.

Following in the wake of the publication of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) developmentally appropriate practice text (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), there came an abundance of print resources designed to support the implementation of the learning through play philosophy (McKee & Association for Childhood Education International, 1986; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Reynolds & Jones, 1997). The publication of such companion volumes continues (Sluss, 2005; Gestwicki, 2007). Furthermore, the development of play materials to accompany the learning through play philosophy has resulted in primary coloured plastic dominating North American early care and learning centres and community playgrounds, as well as many homes. For example, in the 2003 Canadian edition of *Child Development* adapted by L.B. Berk and E.A. Levin, 'making a house of toy blocks' (Berk & Levin, 2003, p. 604) is an example of constructive play especially common amongst children between three and six years of age.

Play within the developmentally appropriate practice construction is considered an antidote to academics in the early years. Proponents claim that a child will be well prepared to enter formal schooling if given an opportunity to develop knowledge in a developmentally appropriate practice play context. We find it interesting that this strong voice against academics in early childhood actually sets the primary purpose of play as being for academic preparation. Whether by play or by structured learning, it seems the purpose of childhood is to get children ready for the academic setting (Miller et al, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

While most writings on play contain sections that bring the reader's attention to how play is influenced by gender, culture and special needs, and to the fact that different provisions for play might be appropriate in some cases (Hughes, 1999; Frost et al, 2005; Fromberg & Bergen, 2006), attempts to understand play from contexts outside of developmental psychology are just beginning. The reconceptualization of play is slow to reach the level of the introductory child development or play study textbook.

Within the field of sociology there began a movement to rethink and reconceptualize western views of children and childhood (Jenks, 1996; James & Prout, 1997; Prout, 2000). This dialogue has been taken up and continues within the early childhood care and education domain (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Penn, 2005). Still, it seems that finding a recipe for the proper provision of early childhood care and education remains the focus. For example, Brooker (2005) and Edwards (2003, 2005), while providing valuable critiques of Piagetian dominated learning through play, both turn to the Reggio Emilia conception of early childhood practice as the model to follow instead. Hatch (2005), in providing a 'balanced' framework for teaching in the 'new kindergarten', still seems to be looking to find the template for the right way to do early childhood practice. MacNaughton and Williams (2004) seem to think if we can just get our 'techniques' right we will have it made. The study and analysis of play with the aim of producing 'excellence, structure, and quality' (Moyles, 2005) prevails.

### Reconceptualizing Play

Understanding play in cultural context is a growing field of study (Tobin et al, 1989; Roopnarine et al, 1994; Göncü, 1999; Reifel, 1999; Roopnarine, 2002), and it is becoming evident that play requires investigation from within a sociocultural-historical perspective. Play as understood and lived in the

developmentally appropriate practice conception is not universal. Children growing up in non-Eurocentric contexts experience daily life differently and thus experience play differently. Play takes various roles and conceptions depending on sociocultural-historical circumstances.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that ideas dearly held within developmentally appropriate practice – learning through play, child-centred practice, and following the child's lead – are not a part of all cultures and do not have meaning to all people. One might take the standpoint that these alternative ways of being in the world with young children, though they apply in their indigenous context, have no place within the North American context. The reality is, however, given the movement of people worldwide, practices are being transplanted; other practices are here. The question becomes: How are these alternative ways of living and being with young children incorporated into or juxtaposed against the developmentally appropriate practice way?

We suggest that in order for early childhood educators to step outside the developmentally appropriate practice structure, we need to be open to seeing and incorporating into our practice other ways of being in the world with young children so that they may gain the freedom to negotiate their identities in the liminal space play can provide. We argue that play creates a hybrid space for the production of new cultural meaning because, as Langeveld (1984) puts it, 'Through play we see how the things in this world need not have fixed meanings. What in the open sense-making is a pencil now suddenly is a bridge, a road block, a soldier, or a house' (p. 216). The openness of possibilities in play allows new things to emerge. It also allows changes and newness to materialize in the play world. The play experience is rich and exciting; it is here and now. Van Manen (1986) points out that for the child the world is open and easily changeable. Multiple worlds are not so much a matter of fantasy as that this is *this* and/or it is *that*. In other words, only adults are locked into a world of fixed meanings. For children things are not yet clearly defined and structured. Barrs (1985) calls this quality of being 'knowing by becoming'. It is a kind of knowing that one needs to *enter* into the *core* of what one wants to understand. It is through play, that newcomer children come to understand what it means to be a child and a preschooler in the host country, and through play they communicate and negotiate their new understandings of themselves and of their expected (new) roles to their parents.

### **Background of the Study**

Refugees from south Sudan are amongst the refugee population entering Canada after protracted stays in refugee camps. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it is estimated that in 2005 there were over one million Sudanese persons of concern, meaning refugees, asylum seekers, returned refugees, and internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2006b). While the Sudanese experience is not every refugee's experience and even among the Sudanese, there are diverse pre-migration histories, still, the Sudanese parents who participated do serve as a representative group of the too often 'typical' refugee experience. At first glance, the three children who participated in the study too could be seen as typical – that is, having little say in what is happening in their lives. However, our experiences working with refugee families indicate that although young children are most times thought of as passive recipients of what life has to offer, preschool refugee children do influence how these families adjust to life in Canada.

With respect to the in-betweenness of young refugee children, the evidence presented here illustrates how three Sudanese four-year-old boys serve as cultural mediators, as they actively negotiate, and contest their identities in the context of open-ended play interactions with their mothers. Taken together, the families are representative of the various stages of the acculturation process. One family had been in Canada for only a few months at the time of the research, another for about half of the child's life, and the third has lived in Canada since their son was a newborn. Each of the mother/child dyads has experienced differing levels of support and intervention through the settlement agency serving as the research site, including involvement in the early care and learning centre operated by the agency. All of the child participants were due to begin kindergarten a few months following the research.

The study addresses the questions: What are the relationship dynamics that develop between preschool refugee children and the adults in their lives as together they forge new ways of 'being'? In what ways do children influence the strategies parents use to guide or mediate the children's

learning in the new cultural context? How do the children negotiate and contest their own identities in the use of the materials? And what influence do the children exert upon the way the mothers negotiate their identities in this hybrid space? In order to explore these questions, the interactions between the three Sudanese mothers and their sons while engaged in building with blocks were videotaped and then analysed. The early childhood artefacts used in this research, wooden building blocks, consist of 100 pieces in various shapes – rectangles, pillars, cylinders, triangles, cubes, arches, half circles – and contain coloured as well as neutral blocks. Commonly referred to as ‘manipulatives’ in the early childhood field, and typically used in small motor skill development as well as concept formation, these are materials Canadian-born children and their parents in general have ready access to both in their homes and in early care and learning centres. Not only are Canadian-born children of this generation usually familiar with these types of blocks, many of their parents too will have grown up using them (Wolfe, 2000). This is not the case for Sudanese families new to Canada. Though their children might have had access to these types of materials in a United Nations-sponsored refugee camp before coming to Canada, and most certainly now have access to them in the early care and learning centres they attend, the mothers have had little to no direct experience with these materials either as children or as adults, yet wooden building blocks are common artefacts of the early childhood culture these families have entered.

### **Sudanese Refugee Children as Cultural Mediators in the Hybrid Space of Play**

Three Sudanese refugee families in various stages of integration to life in Canada offer insight into the possibilities play can offer as a liminal site for negotiating the transition from home to preschool.

#### *Nyabelung and Keon*

In Nyabelung and Keon, newly arrived in Canada six months before the time of the research, we see Nyabelung (the mother) dominating the use of the blocks, and chastising Keon when he comes too close or tries to get involved. Later, when viewing the video recording with Nyabelung, she was asked why Keon was not welcomed into sharing the blocks with her. She said it is her job as the parent to teach her child and since she has no experience with these blocks, she needs to learn how to use them first. By not allowing Keon to interfere, she allows herself enough time to master the task she perceives to have: building a house. It is significant to note that Keon for the most part seems very willing to comply with his mother’s insistence that he not get involved. When he is present at the table, his hands are usually folded resting in front of him. Three times, he reaches to touch the block structure Nyabelung has made, and then of his own accord withdraws his hand. On two occasions, he seems to find it humorous that his mother is preventing his involvement. One gets the feeling that he is sharing some kind of joke as he tries to provoke his mother before he retreats, shrugs, and smiles while looking towards the video camera. We question whether the minimal experiences Keon has with developmentally appropriate practice expectations regarding the use of wooden building blocks have already shown him that he is the one who ‘should’ have central use of the materials, not his mother. Still, the feeling one gets in watching Keon is that he is simply waiting while his mother partakes in this activity.

Refugee parents want their children to succeed, to be happy, and live well in Canada. ‘I want my children to be better than me. I want them to do well at school.’ These are common refrains among refugee parents. One can sense such determination in Nyabelung’s actions. Finishing her structure using these unknown-to-her materials is something of great importance, something she needs to master (see Figure 1). If Nyabelung is able to bring such purpose and resolve to this unfamiliar task, what measure of purpose and resolve does she bring to tasks considered essential to the well-being of children within her more familiar cultural context?

*Commentary.* The lack of familiarity with the new cultural artefacts (i.e. the blocks) confronts Nyabelung’s traditional cultural sense of competency as an adult who is ultimately more knowledgeable and skilful than a child. However, her traditional cultural position and role as an

authority figure is not damaged by her lack of skills required by the new cultural context. She does not hesitate to exert her 'power' by pushing Keon's hand away while he tries to get to the blocks. She pursues her task with determination and admirable persistence. Her role and identity as a mother, who has to teach her son what she knows best, are solidly grounded in her cultural tradition. However, her actions as a novice user of the new set of cultural artefacts show insecurity and confusion caused by the breaking of the cultural meaning of interaction with her child in the new context. The fact that she has to learn how to build a house with these blocks (and fails several times) in front of him perhaps causes some discomfort and ambivalence regarding her role. We can only observe the seriousness on her face, and the total concentration on the task. Not once does she look at her son or at the camera: her eyes are fixated on the blocks.



Figure 1. Nyabelung and Keon.

Keon's behaviours too are, for the most part, grounded in the cultural expectations of his family. He is to be respectful of his mother, allowing her the time she needs to complete the task. He is not to interfere with it. We believe, however, that his 'playful' attempts to get to the blocks and to start building his own house demonstrate a 'crack' in his 'culturally appropriate way' of interacting with his mother, especially when he repeats the attempts twice after his mother demonstrates indisputably that she will not give in. Not having his new role as a playmate to his mother allowed, a role non-existent in his family's culture, Keon reverts to his more comfortable position and waits patiently for his turn to come after his mother is finished building.

#### *Nyalah and Razi*

With Nyalah and Razi, the second dyad, having been in Canada for approximately two years (half of Razi's life), we see a deep sense of peacefulness and connection between mother and son. In observing Nyalah and Razi, there is a deep sense of togetherness and awareness, a profound feeling of 'being with the other', even though they do not converse. There is no sense that something needs to be done or accomplished; mother and son are simply content to 'be'.

Though there is minimal verbal communication between Nyalah and Razi, they are keenly aware of each other's presence and progress with the building task. Nyalah, in sharing only fleeting looks at what Razi is doing, is still very aware of his need for blocks even though he never asks for

any. She periodically sweeps a few blocks within closer reach of Razi and when she selects blocks that do not seem to fit with her construction plans, she moves them closer to within his reach. Razi, after continually stealing sideways glances at his mother's construction, towards the end of the session begins to incorporate her style of building into his own work.

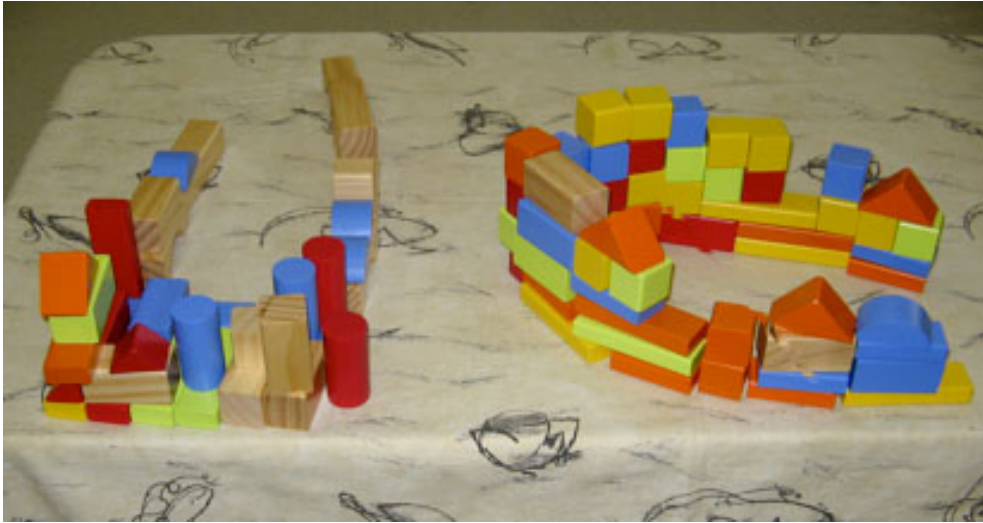


Figure 2. Nyalah and Razi.

*Commentary.* The 'play episode' between Nyalah and Razi can be interpreted as demonstrating a further change in the traditional cultural roles of interaction between a Sudanese mother and child. Although Nyalah has never used blocks before, she has seen them in Razi's day-care centre. She is perhaps more aware of the western view of the materials as being for children's play, and is not so determined to master the task of building a house with them so that she can 'teach' her son how to do this afterwards. She appears to be interested in 'trying the materials out' as she builds a building she has in mind through numerous trial-and-error episodes. She also appears to acknowledge that since this is 'child's play', Razi too needs to have some blocks to play with while she is trying the new materials out. However, her traditional authoritative role as an adult and mother is demonstrated through her deliberate choice of the materials Razi can have available – that is, the ones she does not need for accomplishing her task.

Razi's behaviour is one of a respectful son, patiently waiting for his mother to give him some of the blocks so he too can start building. Even though he has a lot more experience building with these blocks as he has been attending the early childhood centre at the settlement agency off and on since arriving in Canada, he never attempts to show his mother how to use them, or to correct her when her estimation of space is inaccurate. His appreciation of her general position as a more knowledgeable member of his cultural group is demonstrated by the fact that he, despite his greater experience with the blocks, ends up incorporating his mother's building solution into his structure (see Figure 2; Nyalah's building is on the right, Razi's on the left). Thus, the further blend of the 'old' and the 'new' ways of being is observable in the hybrid space created by play. One could also conclude that the traditional cultural ways of interacting are very much present in this dyad.

#### *Nyakesha and Chata*

At the time of the research, the third dyad, Nyakesha (the mother) and Chata, had been in Canada for almost four years, having arrived when Chata was an infant. The play episode is remarkable in the sense that it is difficult if not impossible at times to determine who was leading whom in the process. Both the mother and the son vie for the same blocks, argue over what to build, brush each other's arms out of the way as they reach over each other to access the blocks, and each want to perform the same actions. At one point Chata leaves the table to look at Nyakesha through the



vantage point of the video camera. After Chata returns to the table, Nyakesha takes a turn to look back at Chata through the camera. As the session progresses, they take up the task of building by following the pictures printed on the side of the box the blocks came in. While Chata is the one who first notices the pictures and brings them to the attention of his mother, Nyakesha takes hold of the box and places it at her end of the table. Chata decides that they are building according to the pictures, but she has the pictures closer to her.

They proceed to form a series of structures that mirror the pictures on the side of the box (see Figure 3). At times, they disagree on how the building should proceed. Chata becomes agitated; his voice rises, as he says, 'Okay!' or 'No, no, no; I want to make this one!' Nyakesha smiles or laughs in response to their disagreements. At one point Nyakesha offers, 'Wow!' as she admires her own building results, and once she offers the same response to something Chata has made. As Nyakesha becomes engaged in following the building pattern on the side of the box, she increasingly brushes Chata's arm away when he attempts to add blocks to the structure, and on one of these occasions when he does contribute to the building she tells him, 'Wrong way.'



Figure 3. Nyakesha and Chata.

*Commentary.* The observation of the last dyad reveals a qualitative change in the traditional cultural roles of mother and child exhibited by the previous two dyads. It appears that in this play episode, there is no authority figure; rather, there is a struggle over whose ideas will dominate, and who will control whom. It is fair to say that Chata manages to get an upper hand in suggesting the use of the model printed on the box to build their structure. Nyakesha seems to have accepted Chata's lead without relinquishing completely her control by keeping the picture closer to her. Yet, more often than not, she is the one who copies what Chata is doing with the blocks. Only when she gets her building going according to the model does she see it as her project and tries to keep Chata away by brushing his hand.

Chata's behaviour appears to be inconsistent with the traditional cultural model of his family, according to which he is expected to respect his mother's decisions and actions even when they are not what he wants. Arguing and raising his voice while talking to his mother are certainly not culturally acceptable ways of behaviour. Interestingly, he is not reprimanded for his behaviour.

### A Continuum within the Hybrid Space

A common thread that can be traced through the interactions of the three dyads is that of respect. Keon is seen patiently waiting while his mother utilizes the materials in her own way. Razi we see cautious in his use of the materials, allowing his mother preferential selection of the blocks, and continually checking out the corner of his eye to see how she is progressing in her building. In contrast to the other two boys, it is interesting to note the seeming lack of respect Chata shows his mother. He repeatedly disagrees, shows frustration, and interrupts what Nyakesha is doing. Nyakesha shows inconsistency in her response to this. At times, she remains firm in what she wants to happen – for example, holding tight to the box and placing it where she wants it on the table. At other times, she laughs in response to Chata's insistence on doing things his way. Nyakesha repeatedly brushes Chata's arm away, as Nyabelung did with Keon, but the difference is that Chata never gets the message; he continually tries to interrupt his mother.

Why such a difference? Personality, perhaps, or coincidence? We think not. Nyakesha and Chata have had the most exposure to the developmentally appropriate practice early childhood culture, and Nyakesha appears very much in transition. She displays traits similar to Nyabelung who is very new to Canada; she wants to learn how the blocks work, and she repeatedly brushes Chata away when he interrupts what she is doing. On the other hand, she invites Chata's involvement by asking him questions, and follows his lead when he introduces the pictures on the side of the box. Chata, in having had much exposure to developmentally appropriate practice, is very familiar with the materials, he has had more experience with building blocks than his mother, and he, we believe, considers himself the expert. Furthermore, child-centred practice is something he has come to expect. The experience ought to be 'all about him'. Whereas the experience with Razi and Nyalah exudes a sense of peacefulness, and the observation of Keon and Nyabelung a sense of purpose and resolve, with Chata and Nyakesha the feeling is one of competition. One system, one way of being, one person's desire is in opposition to the other.

### Discussion

In the analysis of the play episodes described above, we take the critical perspective offered by a number of scholars, including Hauser and Jipson (1998); Lubeck (1998a,b); Dahlberg et al (1999); Soto (2000); Jipson and Johnson (2001); Johnson (2001); and Cannella (2002). We concur with Cannella (2002) that developmentally appropriate practice has privileged child-centred, play-based instruction as the 'universal human pedagogy that is appropriate for all human beings, the truth for everyone' (p. 117), which in turn denies other cultural values and beliefs about how young children live and learn in the context of their home and community. We see in the evidence provided by three Sudanese mothers and their four-year-old sons that play does serve as a hybrid site for mediating, negotiating, and contesting identity. We see all three mothers, though perhaps unknowingly, contesting the move towards the child-centredness of developmentally appropriate practice. When interviewed both individually and as a group, as part of the larger study, many Sudanese parents said that for them what is most important is that their children show them and other adults respect. Having the world centre around the child in the way the West conceives of this notion in the developmentally appropriate practice sense is foreign to them and in fact something to be feared and avoided. To have an outgoing child, one always asking questions and challenging what they see and hear, we are told is an embarrassment and a worry. Children are to be respectful and obedient, not talkative and gregarious. The three boys, however, having been influenced to varying degrees by Canadian early childhood practice and pedagogy, become increasingly involved, through block construction, in re-negotiating their place and role in the family relationships. Keon, having recently arrived in Canada, respectfully folds his hands and waits; Razi builds by his own dimensions, while at the same time keeping close tabs on what his mother is doing; Chata, having considerable exposure to developmentally appropriate practice, is in charge of the direction the block construction takes with his mother, and is sometimes even oppositional to her suggestions.

In regard to the question we asked at the beginning – what roles do the children play in mediating between the home culture and the cultural practices of early care and learning outside their homes? – we see the three boys as offering insight into a possible progression. For Keon, very

new to Canada, his mother leaves little room for him to actively negotiate his place in the play experience. Razi we see in a give-and-take position; both mother and son seem to be eyeing each other to see what can be learned. Chata we see as having made a shift to 'cultural expert', a role that appears to be at odds with his mother's sense of how the two of them ought to relate.

The examples provided above speak to the role that refugee children have, through play, in mediating, negotiating and contesting who they are and who they will become in this new cultural and linguistic context. The examples also speak to the difficult choice mothers face: to assimilate to the 'Canadian way', or to negotiate some hybrid identity through the opportunities provided by the liminal space of play. What we see as important to note is that, because of the openness of play, it provides a third space in which these identity and role negotiations can be non-confrontational and thus allow both children and parents to engage in practices that merge different cultural forms. Our particular concern here is that for Sudanese parents for whom play with children is not a typically occurring event in their lives, play is not naturally a third space, a place where they and their young children can meet to forge hybrid identities. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us as early childhood educators to ask: What are the naturally occurring connections that arise between parents and children from various sociocultural-historical backgrounds that open such hybrid space? How can we facilitate the continuation of such practices in the in-between time of transitioning to a new country such that a common ground occurs in which parent and child can negotiate?

Refugee and immigrant families offer opportunities for the field of early childhood care and education to see and experience other ways of being in the world with young children, provided we are willing to relax the stranglehold of developmentally appropriate practice. If we allow room for alternate expressions of being to arise then early childhood institutions can become a hybrid space, a third space, for children and parents new to Canada, in which to negotiate the hybrid identities that are essential to healthy integration into life in the host country.

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