

Family & Community:

Tools Sudanese Refugees Use to Navigate Diverse Literacy Landscapes

Working Paper

Kristen H. Perry

University of Kentucky

Family & Community:

Tools Sudanese Refugees Use to Navigate Diverse Literacy Landscapes

Hear the words “African refugee”, and certain images often come to mind—starving children with distended bellies and flies crawling around their eyes; uneducated, helpless villagers wrapped in tattered blankets; hovels made from sticks and whatever other building materials may be at hand. While this is certainly one reality for some African refugees, it is not the case for all. African refugees arrive in the U.S. from a variety of backgrounds, speaking many different languages, with a variety of refugee experiences, and with different literacy practices and exposure to formal schooling. Often, however, teachers, administrators, and other educational professionals assume that refugee experiences are all alike—and that they necessarily all match the distressing images presented in the media. Deficit assumptions abound regarding African refugee students in American classrooms. For example, when I first sought a local school district’s permission to observe Sudanese refugee children in their Michigan classrooms, the administration told me that my research would not be possible, because “these people don’t speak English”; I had been working with this community for years before I began the study, and the parents in these families spoke (and read and wrote) English well enough for me to conduct extensive interviews with them. In fact, the children’s own teachers later commented that they had not known these children were refugees until I had pointed this information out to them, because the children spoke English so fluently!

Part of the purpose of this paper, therefore, is to complicate commonly-held assumptions about African refugees by presenting snapshots of three Sudanese refugees—an orphaned youth (commonly referred to as a “Lost Boy”), a highly-educated mother, and a young girl from a less-educated family. Do Sudanese refugees face challenges in the U.S. and in American schools?

Absolutely. Yet they also have access to important funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al, 1995) in their families and communities, both Sudanese and American. In this paper, I will show that Sudanese refugees are incredibly resourceful, and American educators can draw upon these funds of knowledge and this resourcefulness in important ways to help these newcomers to our country become successful in American schools.

Research with Southern Sudanese Refugees

Researcher's Position

My work with Southern Sudanese refugees began shortly after I returned from two years as a U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer in Lesotho, Southern Africa. I learned about a local community of the so-called “Lost Boys” who were seeking academic tutors, and I began working closely with three orphaned youth, one just entering college and the other two still in high school. After a year and a half of this work, one of my students asked me to serve on the board of the Southern Sudan Rescue and Relief Association, a local organization comprised of both Sudanese refugees and Americans. My close relationship with these young men also led to a study of how they practiced literacy in their everyday lives, particularly comparing their literacy lives in Africa with their literacy practices in the U.S and how these practices compared to those of formal schooling. This work, and my deepening relationship with the local Sudanese community, led to my current research project, which involves examining literacy practices in intact Sudanese refugee families with young children. With each of these studies, I have maintained my volunteer work with the participants and the community; I continue to provide academic tutoring and community mentoring services to Sudanese refugees in mid-Michigan.

My research with the Sudanese refugees, both the orphaned youth and the intact families, has been shaped by a sociocultural perspective on literacy. In my study with the orphaned youth

(Perry, 2007; Perry, 2005a; Perry, 2005b), I wanted to understand the refugees' beliefs about literacy, the different ways they used literacy in their lives, the ways in which different languages (e.g., English, Arabic, KiSwahili, and Dinka) related to literacy for the youth, and how well school literacy practices aligned with the everyday literacy practices of these refugees. In my study of refugee families with young children (see Perry, 2005c), I investigated similar questions. In addition to the issues explored with the orphaned youth, I am exploring the ways that the refugee experience has shaped the literacy practices of the parents, as well as the ways in which the young children are making sense of their literacy worlds across the contexts of home, community, and formal schooling. In particular, I am examining the nature of *literacy brokering*—the act of seeking out help in understanding texts and their purposes and uses in the real world—within these families.

Theoretical Framework

Four related perspectives have shaped the research I have conducted in the Sudanese community in Michigan. The perspective of literacy as social practice has informed my belief that literacy is something that people *do*, rather than *have*. Because literacy practices are social, they therefore are shaped broadly by community contexts and specifically by family contexts. And, when people migrate across contexts, they often need brokers who can help them understand the languages and literacy practices that exist in that context.

Literacy as Social Practice

Scholars working within the field of literacy have increasingly recognized the need to understand literacy as a phenomenon that is not solely cognitive; literacy is an ideological social practice shaped by social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Street, 2001). Scholars who work within this

framework of literacy as social practice recognize that literacy looks different among different people, in different places, and in different historical times. Context plays an important role in determining the shape of literacy in a particular community. In addition, communities—and the individuals that inhabit them—have multiple purposes and uses for literacies in their daily lives.

Community in Diaspora

Because literacy is a social phenomenon, the issue of community plays an important role in shaping how individuals and groups take up literacy in their lives. The issue of community becomes complicated when cultural groups disburse around the world; this is especially true for refugees, whose lives have been seriously disrupted by warfare, violence, and multiple migrations and relocations around the world. The concept of community is complex, fluid, and dynamic (Hymes, 1996). Holland et al (1998) suggest that issues of identity and community interact in what they term “imagined community” (p. 247). Imagined communities are often those where community members may not be in direct social contact, due to distance or other factors, but which are held together by “a potent and effective sense of commonality, of membership in a categorical social body” (p. 247). Such a definition of community is particularly relevant for refugees and other diasporic cultural groups; it is especially so for the orphaned refugee youth I have studied, who are not only separated from their homeland, but who are also without family. It is important to note, however, that even the concept of diaspora is rapidly changing, as both globalization and access to new technologies grow (Maguire et al, 2005).

Family Literacy

Like community, family also plays an important role in shaping literacy practices. Over the past two decades, literacy researchers, schools, and policy-makers have increasingly turned their attention to the issue of family literacy (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers & Smythe, 2005;

Auerbach, 1989; Gadsden, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2000). The focus on family literacy suggests that a child's family provides the foundation for his or her literacy development, and research has repeatedly demonstrated strong correlations between a child's reading achievement in school and her parents' educational level, the uses of print and the number of books in the home, and the frequency of parent-child storybook reading (Purcell-Gates, 2000). The emergent literacy framework also suggests that children learn a great deal about literacy before they ever set foot in a classroom. At home, children gain concepts of print (Clay, 1998), such as print directionality and how to hold a book, and they also acquire knowledge of written registers, vocabulary, and letter-sound relationships (Purcell-Gates, 2000). Unfortunately, this body of research is often misinterpreted to mean that families that do not provide certain opportunities for their children are somehow "deficient" (Anderson, Smythe & Shapiro, 2005; Auerbach, 1989).

Although the majority of family literacy research has focused on nuclear families, Gadsden (1998, 2000) prefers to use an intergenerational literacy model rather than a family model. This intergenerational literacy model, according to Gadsden, acknowledges that literacy is impacted by more than just the family members living in a particular household. It also challenges the one-way transmission model of family literacy by arguing that intergenerational literacy development is multi-directional; that is, children also influence their parents' literacy practices (and other generations' practices, as well). Much of the ethnographic research that investigates literacy in home and community settings supports this intergenerational model. For example, Gregory (2005; Gregory & Williams, 2000) noted that siblings often play an important role as literacy teachers, what she calls "guiding lights", in Bengali populations in East London. In my own work with Sudanese refugee families, I have often seen the young children specifically teaching their parents about English or about computer technology. And, as I will

argue in this paper, my work with the Sudanese refugees in Michigan suggests that concepts about “community” and “family” may be fluid and overlapping.

Literacy Brokering

When refugees come to a new context, they encounter new languages, new texts, and new literacy practices. They may still interact with members of their own cultural communities, but they are simultaneously immersed in the dominant culture’s literacy context. Immigrants and refugees rely on many resources as they work to understand a new language, new literacy practices, and how language and literacy are used in this new context. Frequently, newcomers rely on *language brokers* (Mazak, 2006; Orellana, Dorner & Pulido, 2003; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003; Tse, 1996) to help them understand texts they encounter and are expected to use in their daily lives. Language and literacy brokering involves translation or interpretation that is done on an informal basis by individuals who are not trained to provide such services (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Tse, 1996). Immigrant and refugee families may rely on a number of different types of language brokers, but they often rely most heavily on family members—particularly their own children—when it comes to brokering language and literacy in the U.S. Language brokering, therefore, is a construct that often is applied specifically when children are called upon to interpret or translate for family members.

Much of the scholarly literature related to brokering focuses on interpretation of oral language and, to a lesser degree, culture. Unlike other scholars who largely emphasize the linguistic aspects of brokering, Orellana, Dorner, and Pulido (2003), argue that brokering involves mediation of cultural as well as linguistic meanings. Yet, it is clear that brokers also are called upon to provide support for written language, and these brokers draw upon a variety of linguistic, textual, and cultural resources as they negotiate meaning in different ways. More

recent brokering scholarship emphasizes these textual aspects of brokering events (Mazak, 2006; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999), for example, describes the different types of language support that children were called upon to provide in their families. Much of this brokering involved printed texts: “Translation spanned different activities including television news, important government documents and other mail, newspapers, ordering food or other services at restaurants or stores, and basic communication with English-speaking merchants and/or officials” (p. 728). Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza (2003) noted that brokers not only were asked to help understand printed texts, but they also used texts as resources to negotiate meaning: “Children and parents collaboratively use the tools available to them, including national languages, dictionaries, electronic devices, and specialized knowledge of bureaucratic institutions, as well as social resources, to parse and coconstruct meanings of these texts” (2003, p. 30). This newer focus on textual brokering, particularly when children act as brokers, therefore, may have enormous implications for how the educational community thinks about literacy development and family literacy, particularly in families where English is not the first language of the home.

Methodology

For both studies, I used a typical ethnographic case study methodology. These studies relied heavily on participant-observation, various types of interviews, and the collection of different types of literacy artifacts. In addition, I offered academic tutoring and community mentoring or cultural broker services to the participants, which not only helped me to gain access and build trust with the families, but also was a way in which I could give back to them by offering to help them as they had helped me.

Observations

Throughout both studies, I observed the environments within which the Southern Sudanese lived, read and wrote. In the study of the orphaned youth, formal observations occurred over approximately seven months, with at least two visits made per week. In the family study, formal observations occurred over 18 months. Observations typically lasted 1-2 hours. The majority of these observations occurred in the homes of focal participants, whom I visited as both researcher and academic tutor/community mentor. Some observations also took place during large-scale community events to which I was invited, such as graduation parties and Sudanese holiday celebrations. These observations involved noting texts, literacy events, participant structures of those events, and the language of the event and/or text in addition to other cultural and contextual information. In the family study, I also observed the focal children in their kindergarten or first grade classrooms.

Interviews

I utilized the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS) semi-structured interview protocol (Purcell-Gates, 2007) to guide both the observations and the semi-structured interviews I conducted. The interview began with a narrative elicitation of what literacy means to the informant. The protocol asked about such things as current and past literacy practices, both in and out-of school, and texts read and/or written. It also asked about practices of people in participants' communities, family members, and so on. I interviewed the orphaned youth and the family members about the types of texts and literacy practices with which participants engaged, both in their previous lives in Africa and in the U.S. I also collected life histories and other important cultural information. Each focal participant was interviewed at least once; most were interviewed multiple times. I audiotaped and then transcribed each interview. I also completed a demographic survey with each participant.

Artifact Collection

Whenever possible, I collected sample written texts that seemed representative of practices reported by informants. I gathered a variety of literacy artifacts, including texts that were read and written by both focal participants and other community members, audio recordings of events such as church services, and photographs of literacy events and the literacy environments. Typically, I photocopied or scanned textual artifacts and returned them to their owner, although I kept the originals in some cases, when appropriate. These texts were analyzed for what they revealed of significance in relation to the research questions and used to triangulate data sources for the final interpretations.

Data Analysis

I coded data from fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and artifacts on a variety of levels. The most basic level of coding involved identifying texts, languages, purposes and functions for reading and writing, sociotextual domains, and contexts of the various literacy events described in the study. Other specific codes emerged from the data themselves. I organized these data into different types of analytical matrices and conceptual maps (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Content analysis in these studies focused on the historical and cultural contexts of the southern Sudanese. Specifically, I used theme analyses to understand the meanings that participants ascribed to literacy, to education, and to their literacy practices in general. Discourse analysis of portions of the transcripts provided important insights into the ways in which participants positioned themselves as literacy practitioners in their various contexts. In addition to analyzing the content, themes, and discourses of interview transcripts, I also analyzed literacy artifacts (texts and photographs) using these methods.

Participants

Three focal participants—Chol, Ezra, and Francis¹—provided much of the data for the study of the orphaned youth. These three participants were all young men; only a handful of “Lost Girls” lived in Michigan, and they tended to be younger than the Lost Boys and did not seem to identify with that group. Two of these young men were members of the Dinka tribe, and one was a member of the Madi tribe in Sudan. All three attended tertiary education—two at the local community college, and one at a private business college.

Three Sudanese families with young children participated in the second study. These families represented different ethnic groups from across Southern Sudan. The parents in the three families represented very different levels of educational attainment in Sudan—from 7th grade through law school. From these families, I selected four focal children—two boys and two girls, one of each gender in kindergarten and first grade.

Historical and Cultural Context

Issues facing Sudan are increasingly prominent in both international news media and global politics. Although much of the world is now aware of the plight of Darfur, many people are not aware that Southern Sudan has faced similar conflicts for over two decades. The Southern Sudanese are members of various tribes located in southern Sudan; these southerners, typically black African Christians (unlike the people of Darfur, who are Muslim), have been engaged in a civil war against the northern-dominated Arab Muslim government for over twenty years. The war that displaced the Southern Sudanese was the result of centuries of deep ethnic and religious divisions (Bok, 2003; Deng, 1995). This war completely devastated Southern Sudan. At least two and a half million people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, and five million people have been displaced as refugees—far more than have been affected in Darfur. The

¹ Pseudonyms. The Institutional Review Board approval for this project required me to use pseudonyms. The families in my second study, however, all chose to use their real names as they participated in my research.

conflict in Southern Sudan caused a mass exodus of southerners, many of whom ended up as refugees in Egypt or the Kakuma Refugee Camp near Lake Turkana in Kenya, where they typically spend many years before being granted asylum in countries such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. The three focal families, for example, spent years sojourning in the Middle Eastern cities—Cairo, Egypt and Beirut, Lebanon—before being granted asylum in the U.S. In contrast, the so-called “Lost Boys”² undertook an arduous and dangerous journey of over 1,000 miles—entirely on foot. Only 7,000 of the original group survived to reach the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya in 1992 (Yang, 2002), where they spent their formative years. The U.S. government has made a particular effort to resettle these youth (U.S. Department of State, 2001).

Language and Literacy Practices of Sudanese Refugees: An Overview

The results of both research studies show that Southern Sudanese refugees use literacy in a variety of meaningful ways, and in many languages. The orphaned youth, for example, attended school in English in the Kakuma Refugee Camp. They also learned KiSwahili, the national language of Kenya, in these schools, and some became literate in Dinka or other local languages. In addition, most also speak Arabic to some degree. The refugee families are similarly multilingual and multi-literate. All of the parents are literate in both Arabic and English, although their comfort levels with English vary. The families speak both English and Arabic at home, and the parents also speak a variety of other local Sudanese languages. For example, one mother speaks seven different languages. The children in these families, therefore, have access to a rich variety of linguistic resources.

² These orphans were first called “Lost Boys” by a Western journalist who compared them to characters in *Peter Pan*. I typically refer to these refugees as “orphaned youth”, although some of the youth in Michigan refer to themselves as “Lost Boys” and others as “New Sudan Youth”.

Many of the meaningful literacy practices in this community of refugees focused around key areas of their lives. Religion, for example, played an important role in shaping literacy practices for most of these refugees. Church life and reading the Bible, in both English and Arabic, provided important motivations for these refugees to read and write. In addition, staying in touch with friends and family who had either been left behind in Africa or resettled in other parts of the world guided many of the literacy practices of the orphaned youth and the families. The Sudanese refugees also actively sought information about the political situation and the peace process in Sudan. Although most had had little, if any, access to computer technology in Africa, many refugees had become very skilled in the U.S. at navigating the Internet to access information about their homeland.

Significantly, education and formal schooling played a very large role in the literacy lives of these refugees. The Sudanese community highly valued education—they saw it as not only a way to better their own individual lives, but more importantly as a way to improve the situation in Sudan. Many of the refugees felt that it was their duty to obtain a good education so that they could go back to Africa and help to build a New Sudan. Many of the Sudanese participants equated education with improving Sudan’s lot, as well as with improving their own life chances. Becoming educated, they believe, is one of the most important duties they have to those left behind in Africa. For example, in *Escape from Slavery*, Bok (2003) described the two great dreams in his life as “to get an education and to do something that would help our people by telling my story” (p. 187). The orphaned youth, in particular, strongly believed in the power of education. Ezra explained his hunger for education this way:

I saw it necessary for me to be able to read and write, because—maybe partly because I was there by myself, alone, and I have seen many professionals, and I admired what they

do and their positions, and the kind of life that they were living. I was so desperate, living by myself without any parents, without any relatives, without any older person to give me advice and guidance—so, I felt that as long as I live and as long as God keeps me alive and lets me breathe, I would do anything I could to become one day a professional like some of the people that I saw there.

In fact, there is even a proverb among the youth: “Education is my mother and my father” (Lost Boys of Sudan, n.d.).

Family & Community: Literacy and Educational Resources

For the orphaned youth, literacy, education, and community transacted with and co-constructed each other. Community-oriented domains of social activity such as religion, interpersonal communication, and community organization provided powerful motivations for literacy practices among this group of Sudanese. As Sudanese refugees find themselves in diaspora around the globe, it is not surprising that they utilize literacy practices in such a way to mediate community; that is, community becomes something that is textually mediated when it can be no longer physically or spatially mediated. As literacy gains increasing importance in a particular community, so too must education—education provides opportunities for literacy as well as the means through which the Sudanese may “do something that would help our people,” as Bok says (2003, p. 187). Literacy appears to be a particularly important mediator of community for the orphaned youth, a group who are without parents and family, and who must somehow make their way in a new country and culture, while simultaneously maintaining an identity as Sudanese.

Family also played an important role in how Sudanese refugees in Michigan related to both literacy and formal education. The Sudanese refugees that I work with think of family in a

very broad sense; indeed, “family” and “community” often seemed to mean much the same thing for these refugees. In fact, I often found myself perplexed by the relationships described by the families with whom I was working. The same individual might be referred to as an “aunt” on one occasion and as a “cousin” on another. The children often referred to their cousins as sisters and brothers. Even those refugees, such as the orphaned youth, who have been separated from their families by war, managed to create new family-like networks. Yang (2002), a photographer, documented the lives of the orphaned youth while they were still in Africa and the close bonds that the youth developed. He noted:

In the weeks and months of their journeys, traveling mostly at night to avoid being bombed from the air or captured by ground troops, lions were a constant threat. The boys began to form close-knit groups, a new sense of family following the loss of their own (no page number).

The youth brought this new sense of family with them to the U.S., where several youth often lived together in an apartment or house. In fact, one tactic that the youth used in order to stay together when they were applying to come to the U.S. was to claim kinship with other orphaned youth, because the refugee resettlement agencies tried to keep relatives together.

The Sudanese community in Lansing is relatively large, consisting of several hundred people, some of whom are related and some of whom are not. However, even unrelated refugees sometimes refer to each other as family. Viola, for example, introduced me to Falabia, whose family also began to participate in my study. Of Falabia, Viola told me, “We are like one family.” She also told me that Falabia’s elderly mother lived in Lansing, and that she was “like a mother” to the whole community. In many ways, there does not seem to be a clear boundary between the Sudanese definitions of “family” and “community” as they are enacted in the U.S.;

they are fluid and interconnecting concepts. Some of the refugees that I work with even refer to Americans in familial terms. Akhlas' daughter, Remaz, not only refers to a White friend from church as her "auntie", but Remaz and her mother also refer to me as "Auntie Kristen" as well! Clearly, close friends and other caregivers can be "family" as well as relatives by blood and by marriage.³

Family & Community, Literacy & Education: Individual Snapshots

The Sudanese refugees drew upon these extended family resources in many ways as they adjusted to life in America and as they pursued education. In this section, I will provide snapshots of three refugees—an orphaned young man, the mother of a family, and a little girl from a different family—to show how these family and community networks supported these refugees' educational and literacy achievement.

Chol

Chol was the first Sudanese refugee that I began tutoring, shortly after I returned from living in Africa myself. Chol's story is typical of most of the orphaned Sudanese youth. Chol, a member of the Dinka tribe, became separated from his family when he was about four years old; he has since regained contact with a brother and some other relatives who live in Khartoum. In an autobiography assignment for school, Chol wrote,

The war separated me from [my] parents in 1986, and I have learned and experienced problems and many other consequences from it. I have seen many people dying, drowning and starving. I am a survivor of that war. In 1986 I escaped to Ethiopia, where I learned the life of being a child refugee in that country. I was lonely without my parents.

³ Of course, this occurs in the U.S., too; Dyson (2003), for example, describes a group of unrelated first graders who refer to themselves as "the brothers and the sisters".

Along with the other orphaned youth, Chol was forced out of Ethiopia and went to Kenya. Chol explained that, growing up in Kakuma Refugee Camp, he formed new family units with other refugees; many of the orphaned children, including Chol, lived with foster mothers there. Chol and the other youth that I interviewed for my first study explained that few community elders lived in the camp, but those that were available were very important to the youth. These elders used storytelling to pass on Dinka culture, history, beliefs and values to the youth, and they also offered important guidance. For example, Chol told me that when the youth were first offered the opportunity to come and live in America, they consulted with the community elders. Chol explained that these elders at first advised them not to go, worried that the youth might be sold into slavery. He told me, “The community said, ‘No, maybe you are going to be given to the Arab people.’” In fact, the American representative made several visits over two years before she convinced the community that bringing Chol and other youth to the U.S. was a good idea. Deng (1995) notes that Southern Sudanese cultures tend to view orphanhood as an exceptionally deprived condition, so it is not surprising that the community came together to provide family-like structures and guidance to the orphaned youth.

These new family structures carried over into the youths’ lives in the U.S. Many chose to live together. Those who had access to academic tutors or helpful American foster families frequently called upon these people to help mentor those who had less access to those resources. Chol, for example, often asked if I could come over and fix his roommate’s computer, despite the fact that I am quite technologically inept. The youth with better jobs and steadier sources of income often supported those who did not. In fact, Chol organized several of his friends into the Brothers’ Union Investment Club (see Figure 1). The members of the Brothers’ Union each deposited a small sum of money in the club’s account each month, and this money was then used

to support members in need. For example, a member who needed to pay for car repairs could use the pooled money. This is a common support system in many African communities; indeed, the women in my village in Lesotho had a similar “investment club”. What I think is particularly interesting here is the name of the group: the Brothers’ Union. This name clearly reflects the ways in which these unrelated young men created a new sense of family—not only in name, but also as a source of real, practical support.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The wider American community also embraced these orphaned youth and provided them with many family-like resources. The social services agencies not only provided caseworkers for the refugees, but they also had received grant money to support the youths’ education and cultural adjustment. Chol arrived in Lansing with a large contingent of other orphaned Sudanese youth in December, 2000. For two years or so after this group’s arrival, the social service agencies offered a weekly afternoon/evening program for the youth that provided academic tutoring, sessions in cultural adjustment, drivers’ education, and recreation time. Each refugee youth who came over as a minor also had funding available to him (and to the handful of “Lost Girls” who also came to this area) specifically for educational uses. This money could be used for tutoring, to buy textbooks once the youth reached college-level education, or for other educational resources. Chol, for example, used some of the money to buy himself a computer to use for schoolwork.

Like many of the other orphaned Sudanese youth, Chol developed relationships with Americans who could help him in different ways. Because Chol knew me as a tutor and as a

teacher, he often called upon me to help him (and his friends) with academic tasks. Once, for example, Chol's friend wanted to send a letter to a church to ask if they could provide some support for his family back in Africa; Chol asked me to come over and help edit the letter for spelling and grammar. Chol also developed a relationship with a middle-aged couple who helped him get his apartment set up, taught him how to drive, and helped him with car-related problems. As he delved more deeply into his business studies, he found a retired businessman who mentored him in this area. In fact, these other Americans and I developed a family-like relationship with Chol; in times where Chol needed help—after an auto accident, for example—we often called or emailed each other to check on Chol and see how we could support him, much like anxious parents.

Chol was also a community leader among the other orphaned youth in the area, and Lutheran Social Services tapped into his leadership abilities. He often helped them organize Sudanese community events, and he regularly contributed a column to the refugee newsletter. Chol also was a founding member of a local organization, the Southern Sudan Rescue and Relief Association (of which I am also a board member), which is a community organization comprised of both Sudanese refugees and Americans that works on improving the lives of the Sudanese, both in Michigan and in Africa. All of the Americans on the board of this organization have worked closely with Sudanese orphaned youth, often acting as foster parents and community mentors for them. I believe that Chol's participation in this group shows how intertwined issues of family and community are for this group of refugees.

Remaz

Remaz is a much younger refugee child, just beginning her education in an American kindergarten. Remaz's mother, Akhlas, and father, Amin, come from the Nuba Mountains region

of Sudan; the Nuba live farther to the north than most Southern Sudanese, but they have been equally marginalized and are allied with the Southerners. When I first met Remaz, she was a precocious five-year-old who was equally comfortable conversing in English and her family's dialect of Arabic. Remaz's parents both attended school in Sudan; her mother completed primary school, and her father attended a year or two of high school. In Michigan, Remaz's mother works as a seamstress at a factory that produces uniforms, and her father washed dishes in a local hotel, until he became very ill and had to have surgery as a result of complications from a gunshot wound he had received in the conflict in Sudan.

Lansing has a large Sudanese refugee community, and Remaz's family is therefore part of a network of many refugee families with children. Sudanese refugees spend a great deal of time visiting each other, and it was common for various community members to visit Remaz's home while I was there. In fact, other Sudanese families also lived in the same apartment complex, and they often stopped by for tea, to have their hair done, or to watch DVDs of African television programs or African music videos. Remaz referred to many of these community members as relatives. One day, for example, she waved to someone who was pulling out of the parking lot and told me, "That's my auntie!"

Remaz had several extended family members who lived in the area, as well. Akhlas' cousin (who she sometimes referred to as "sister") lived nearby, and Akhlas and the children often stayed there if Amin was out of town. Amin was in the hospital for several weeks following his surgery, and Akhlas' cousin also cared for Remaz and her brother for much of the time that Amin was in the hospital. Recently, Akhlas showed me a picture of a large group of Sudanese women that was taken when the family was still living in Egypt. Akhlas lovingly named the women, carefully explaining their relationship to her (e.g., her uncle's wife) and

telling me where these women now lived—they are scattered across Africa, Europe, North America, and Australia. Although Remaz’s nuclear family was intact, her extended family was spread across the globe, and they keenly felt the separation. A much larger community of people from the Nuba Mountains lived in Ohio, and Akhlas and her family often traveled there to visit extended family members. In fact, they seriously contemplated a move to that region to be closer to their family and their ethnic group.

Like Chol, Remaz had access to an extended American support group as well. Remaz’s family had been sponsored by a local church, which they continued to attend, despite the fact that most Sudanese refugees in the area attended two other churches with large African congregations. The members of this church actively supported Remaz’s family. For example, when Amin was out of work due to his surgery, the church provided gift cards to local discount stores to help with living expenses. When it became apparent that the family’s apartment was not a healthy living environment, someone at the church offered to one of her rental properties to the family at a discounted rate. Carrie⁴, a middle-class White woman and another member of the church, frequently acted as a cultural broker and community mentor for the family. She took the children on outings, invited them over to swim in her pool during the summer, and handed down used children’s books and educational videos to them. In addition, Carrie dropped Remaz off at school every morning and picked her up every afternoon, and she kept in touch with Remaz’s teacher. On many occasions, I heard Akhlas and Remaz refer to Carrie as “auntie”. “Auntie” Carrie clearly played an important role in Remaz’s family; Remaz even insisted, “She’s my auntie for real.”

Like Carrie, I also became Remaz’s “auntie”. After I had been working with Akhlas’ family for several months, she and the children began referring to me as “Auntie Kristen”. When

⁴ A pseudonym, because she is not an official participant in my study.

I once discussed with Remaz the issue of Carrie being her auntie, Remaz told me, “You’re my auntie, too.” In fact, becoming an “auntie” in this family was what first caused me to think about family literacy in a broader way. I am clearly not part of Remaz’s actual family, nor am I a true member of the Sudanese community, but I do play an important role in the family’s literacy practices. I help Remaz with her homework each week, and I also tutor her mother as she continues to develop her English language proficiency. Because my research also takes me into Remaz’s classroom, I sometimes act as a liaison between the family and Remaz’s teacher. In addition, I also act as a literacy broker for the family—on many occasions, Akhlas has called me to help her understand a letter from the school or fill in a necessary form, such as food stamps paperwork. Carrie and I are both good examples of how refugee families draw upon family-like resources outside of their cultural communities as they adjust to life in this country and as they support their children’s educational and literacy experiences.

Remaz’s family also challenges the traditional one-way transmission model of literacy development that suggests that literacy skills are only passed on from parents to children. Like many bilingual children, Remaz often acts as a language and literacy broker for her parents. In conversations with me, for example, Akhlas often calls upon Remaz to supply her with an English word. What is interesting about this family, however, is that Akhlas does not just view Remaz as a translator—she sees her as a teacher. Akhlas frequently describes Remaz as her teacher, and I often have observed this little girl (who only recently turned seven!) not only supplying her mother with English vocabulary, but also actively explaining English grammar and spelling rules! Recently, I shared a dinner meal with the family, and Akhlas told me again how important Remaz’s teaching role is in the family: “Yeah, she teach me. My best teacher—Remaz!” Clearly, Remaz plays an important role in shaping her parents’ English literacy

development, just as they support her by seeking out tutors and providing her with the time, space, and materials to complete her schoolwork.

Viola

Of all the Sudanese community members I know, Viola most challenges traditional stereotypes of African refugees. Viola grew up in an elite, highly-educated southern Sudanese family. When she was a child, Viola's father served as the Minister of Justice in Sudan. Her mother worked as a legal secretary in her father's law practice. As the child of a high-ranking government minister, Viola had many opportunities that weren't available to the majority of black Africans in Sudan. She attended excellent private schools in Khartoum that were expressly set up to serve government officials' children, and she earned a full scholarship to attend university in Egypt, where she earned a law degree. Viola and her husband, Isbon, were both respected as leaders within the Sudanese community. Isbon had served a term as the elected leader for the entire Sudanese community in the area, and Viola had also served as an officer in that organization. She also was tapped to serve as an officer in a national U.S. organization of Sudanese from the Equatoria region of Sudan. Because of her background in law and her level of English ability, Viola often volunteered her time to translate for Sudanese refugees who had been arrested or who were in court for various reasons. In fact, she did this so frequently that she explored the possibility of obtaining certification as an official Arabic-English court translator.

Like the other parents in the family study, Viola was multi-lingual and bi-literate adults—she could read and write fluently in Arabic, and she also had a high level of literacy in English, although she viewed her own abilities with a highly critical eye. Because Viola felt less comfortable reading and writing in English, and because she lived in an American world that required her to do just that on a regular basis, Viola often sought out the help of literacy brokers

who could help her understand what to do with the different texts she encountered in her life. Viola knew how to access a broad network of support in the U.S.—social workers, clergy, sponsoring American families, volunteer tutors, co-workers, neighbors, and other Sudanese refugees who had lived longer in the U.S.

As in Remaz's family, Viola's church provided an important resource for literacy brokering. Viola was very active in her Lutheran churches, and she often relied upon other church members to help her navigate the literacy context in Michigan. Viola had befriended Jen*, the secretary at the church she attended, and she often spoke to me about the literacy activities in which she and Jen took part. For example, Jen organized a women's group at the church that had read the evangelist Rick Warren's *40 Days of Community* together. Like Viola, most of the women participating in this study group were refugees (mostly from Sudan), and Jen provided them with strategies to use as they read through the book and watched the accompanying video series together, such as marking important or confusing passages with yellow sticky notes. Jen and Viola also worked together to plan a Sudanese cultural festival sponsored by the church. Viola had consulted me about the contents of the invitation she needed to create for this festival, and then she and Jen worked together to create a pleasing design on the computer. Viola also reported to me that Jen had offered to let Viola use the church's computers if she needed access to the Internet or to print things out.

Viola also relied upon me a great deal to provide knowledge and information about literacy and texts in the U.S. I provided Viola with knowledge about the English language, such as vocabulary and syntax; with knowledge about American cultural contexts; and with knowledge about genres and textual aspects of the texts she encountered in Michigan. For

* A pseudonym

example, Viola called me in July, 2005, to ask if I could come over and look at some “financial documents” that her husband had received in the mail. When I arrived at the family’s home, Isbon handed me a couple of envelopes from the Publisher’s Clearinghouse sweepstakes, in which he and Viola had carefully preserved all of the contents. Most of these “documents” were form letters, where Isbon’s name had been inserted in the appropriate places. Many of the documents stated that someone with the initials “ID” in Michigan would be chosen as the winner of the upcoming sweepstakes. Viola said they had unsuccessfully tried calling for information, and they didn’t know what they were supposed to do next in order to claim the \$1,000,000 they believed they had won. As I talked with Isbon and Viola, I quickly gathered that they didn’t really understand how sweepstakes programs work in America. It was clear to me that they took the documents’ statements at face value—they didn’t know how to either read the fine print or read between the lines. I spent several minutes explaining about the sweepstakes. I tried to explain that the sweepstakes people choose only one winner out of the whole country; that they send out letters like this to people everywhere, and those letters included identical statements with other people’s names in the same spaces; that I get these letters all the time myself, but just throw them away; that the sweepstakes people just want us to send them money or buy their products. I showed Viola some of the “tricky” language the letter used (e.g., you will win “if you have the winning number”), and showed that everybody gets a different number. I explained that the sweepstakes is kind of like the lottery—many people enter, but only one or two people in the whole country win. I also explained, “In my family, we call this stuff ‘junk mail’, because it’s not good.” In this particular event, Viola and her husband needed knowledge about a particularly American institution—the sweepstakes. They also needed textual knowledge about the genre of junk mail in general and sweepstakes promotions in particular.

In addition to relying on church members and other American friends, Viola also relied upon her own children—little boys who were not yet fluent readers and writers themselves—to help her navigate the textual world in the U.S. She used her two oldest children—Boni and Samuel, in first grade and kindergarten, respectively—to help her understand the mountain of texts that came home from the children’s school. Although Boni and Samuel generally could not read these texts, they typically were aware of the content, and they also understood the purpose and function of those texts—what they were used for in the world. For example, Boni often drew his mother’s attention to the purpose of permission slips and other forms that came home from the school by saying things like, “you gotta sign this *all* today.” Samuel often knew details about the content of these texts, as I noted in my fieldnotes:

Samuel directed his mother’s attention to the folder and said, “Mommy, that’s a fire.

Read that one.” He lifted out the fire department flier and demanded, “Read!”

And, when Boni struggled with reading in school, Samuel alerted Viola to the word list at the back of an easy-to-read book that he’d brought home from the school library, informing her that she could use that list to help Boni practice reading. As these brokering examples illustrate, Viola relied upon both community members and her own family as resources to learn about literacy in the U.S.

Implications

These snapshots challenge us to alter our thinking about Sudanese refugees, literacy, and education. Often, educators worry that their students may not be getting educational or literacy support at home; these snapshots raise the question, “What do we mean by ‘home’?” As these cases illustrate, refugees have a wide variety of supportive resources available to them, although they may not necessarily fit neatly within the traditional family literacy model. Clearly, Chol is

without “family” in the traditional American sense. He has no parents, and the “brothers” with whom he is close in the U.S. are biologically unrelated to him. Yet, without the traditional notions of family support, Chol has managed to succeed quite well in the American educational system; not only did he earn a high-school diploma from a Michigan high school, but he likely will earn his bachelor’s degree next month. The traditional concept of “family literacy” therefore is largely irrelevant for a student like Chol. A broadened concept of “family literacy”—one that includes both an extended definition of “family” and community resources—would fit him well. This broadened concept shows that Chol’s “family”—community mentors, tutors, social workers, and Sudanese “brothers”—supports his learning in a variety of ways. Similarly, according to a traditional family literacy model, most schools likely would consider Remaz’s family as “deficient” because they are still developing their English language and literacy skills, and because they have no experience with the American educational system themselves. Yet, Remaz had access to an extensive network of both Sudanese and American community resources; her Sudanese cousins and her American “aunties” provided a great deal of familial and educational support. Viola relies upon similar community resources, as well as her own young children, to “figure out” literacy in her new context.

Too often, students from marginalized communities, such as the Sudanese refugees that I work with, are characterized as “deficient” or “at-risk”. Schools often believe that students from these communities have few resources available to them, because parents may speak limited or no English, and because schools believe that parents do not understand how the U.S. system works. It is true many children may not be getting the support from parents that teachers and schools might like them to get, but it is equally true that this important support likely could be coming from extended family members or the wider community. Thinking about families and

communities in a broader sense may help to counteract traditional deficit models that suggest that refugee and other immigrant children necessarily are at risk in terms of literacy development or general academic achievement. Case studies such as these can help teachers to understand the rich resources that refugee children can bring to the classroom, as well as help teachers understand how to tap into family and community support for the child, beyond those who live in the immediate household.

Suggestions for Educators

What can educators do with this knowledge? Immigrants and refugees—and those born in the U.S.—have access to some community resources which can support learning. Many children who are affiliated with churches or other faith communities have access to educational and other support services through their churches, as Remaz’s case illustrates. Through faith communities, children may be involved in religious education classes or youth groups that can serve as a support for literacy development. Teachers could ask their students about religious affiliation; teachers may be able to use this information to contact the child’s church, mosque, or synagogue to find out what resources might be available to the student. Other children may be involved in programs such as Boy or Girl Scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, or the Boys and Girls Club of America. These programs often serve as an important source of mentoring and tutoring for children, and again, teachers may be able to work with their child’s tutor or mentor.

Refugee children often have a variety of community resources available to them that “regular” immigrant children do not. Unlike other immigrants, refugee families typically are assigned a caseworker within the social services agency that resettled them in the area. Contacting the family’s caseworker may prove useful to both the teacher and the student. The teacher may be able to learn important information about the family and the broader ethnic

community of refugees, and she may also discover that there are resources available to the family—such as tutoring or funding for educational supplies—that the family is currently unaware of. Some refugee communities have access to specific grant funding for educational support, as did Chol and the other “Lost Boys” in Michigan, and social service agencies often have networks of tutors, both paid and volunteer, who have experience working with refugee families. Many refugee families are “adopted” or sponsored by local churches, even if the families do not attend that church or are not members of that faith community. These churches sometimes have specific funds available to support the sponsored families, and they also may have access to academic tutors or community mentors. In addition, contacting a family’s sponsoring church could alert the church to the fact that the family may be in need of certain resources, such as school supplies or children’s books in English. A sponsoring church may also be able to connect a refugee family with a church member who is skilled in academic tutoring or mentoring.

When educators use broader conceptions of family and also look to the community, we may find that refugee students have many resources available to them. Broadening our perspectives can help us understand that while parents certainly play a role in their children’s literacy development and educational achievement, they may not be the only significant caregivers or support resources that the child draws upon. In many African cultures, for example, older children play an important role in the care and education of younger siblings (Rogoff, 2003); this is certainly the case among the Sudanese community with which I work. Educators who are able to view children as having access to resources, rather than as having needs or “holes” that need to be filled, have a framework from which they may build in order to help all children learn.

References

- Anderson, J., Kendrick, M., Rogers, T., & Smythe, S. (Eds.) (2005). *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities, and Schools*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Auerbach, E.R. (1989). Toward a socio-contextual approach to family literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, 165-181.
- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. London: Routledge.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanič, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Bok, F. (2003). *Escape from Slavery*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Clay, M. (1998). *By different paths to common outcomes*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Deng, F. M. (1995). *War of visions: Conflict of identities in the Sudan*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Gadsden, V.L. (2000). Intergenerational literacy within families. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research* (pp. 871-887). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gregory, E. (2005). Guiding lights: Siblings as literacy teachers in a multilingual community. In Anderson, J., Kendrick, M., Rogers, T., & Smythe, S. (Eds.), *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities, and Schools*, (pp. 21-40). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gregory, E. & Williams, A. (2000). *City Literacies: Learning to read across generations and cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., Tenery, F., Rivera, A., Rendon, P., Gonzales, R., & Amanti, C. (1995). Funds of knowledge for teaching in Latino households. *Urban Education*, 29, 443-470.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte Jr., W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hymes, D. (1996). *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Lost Boys of Sudan. (n.d.). *Lost Boys of Sudan*. Retrieved March 20, 2005, from <http://www.lostboysofsudan.com>

- Maguire, M.H., Beer, A.J., Attarian, H., Baygin, D., Curdt-Christiansen, X.L., & Yoshida, R. (2005). The chameleon character of multilingual literacy portraits: Re-researching in “heritage” language places and spaces. In J. Anderson, M. Kendrick, T. Rogers., & S. Smythe (Eds.), *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities, and Schools: Intersections and Tensions*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Mazak, C.M. (2006). *Negotiating El Difícil: English Literacy Practices in a Rural Puerto Rican Community*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Morales, A & Hanson, W.E. (2005) Language Brokering: An Integrative Review of the Literature. *Hispanic Journal of the Behavioral Sciences*, 27(4), 471-503.
- Orellana, M.F., Dorner, L., & Pulido, L. (2003) Accessing Assets: Immigrant Youth’s Work as Family Translators or “Para-Phrasers”. *Social Problems*, 50(4), 505-524.
- Orellana, M.F., Reynolds, J., Dorner, L., & Meza, M. (2003). In Other Words: Translating or “Para-phrasing” as a family literacy practice in immigrant households. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(1), 12-34.
- Perry, K. (in press). Sharing Stories, Linking Lives: Literacy Practices Among Sudanese Refugees. In V. Purcell-Gates (Ed.), *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Perry, K. (2005a, April). “Helping our people”: The role of literacies in mediating community among Sudanese refugees. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Perry, K. (2005b, July). *From Storytelling to Writing: Transforming Literacy Practices Among Sudanese Refugees*. Paper presented at the 14th World Congress of Applied Linguistics/International Association of Applied Linguistics, Madison, WI.
- Perry, K. (2005c, December). *Making Sense of Literacy Landscapes: A Case Study of a Sudanese Refugee Child’s Literacy Practices in America*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Reading Conference, Miami, Florida.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (Ed). (2007). *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (2000). Family literacy. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research* (pp. 853-870). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Street, B. (2001). The New Literacy Studies. In E. Cushman, G.R. Kintgen, B.M. Kroll, & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 430-442). Boston: St. Martin's Press.
- Tse, L. (1996). Language brokering in linguistic minority communities: The case of Chinese and Vietnamese-American students. *The Bilingual Research Journal*, 20, 485-498.
- U.S. Dept of State. (2001, June 11). Fact Sheet: Sudanese (Kakuma) Youth. Retrieved February 28, 2004, from <http://www.state.gov/g/prm/rls/fs/2001/3398.htm>
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). Gender roles and settlement activities among children and their immigrant families. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42(4), 720-742.
- Yang, D.C. (2002). *Kakuma Turkana*. St. Paul, MN: Pangaea.

Figure 1. Chol's notebook for the Brother's Union Investment Club.

