

“Let me show you how to do the homework”:

Child literacy brokering in and out of school

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One February afternoon, Remaz, a young refugee from the Sudan, accompanied her mother and brother to the home of another family of Sudanese refugees. Akhlas and Falabia, the mothers of both families, were good friends and also were participants in a study of literacy practices among Sudanese refugee families. Their young daughters, focal children in the study, were fast friends as well. On this afternoon, Remaz had brought along her kindergarten homework, which she pulled out of her bag as Akhlas and Falabia looked up automobile information on the Internet. First-grader Juana rushed over and said, “I can help her!” One page of the homework required Remaz to identify words that would complete a given sentence. Juana and Remaz bent over the worksheet, pointing to the text and reading together, “He likes to...” The girls paused on the word “sip”, and Remaz asked me, who usually helped her with her assignments, for help. “NO!” Juana exclaimed, “Sound it out!” Together, the girls sounded out the word. Later, Remaz turned to the last page, a mathematics activity that required her to count and write numbers in the teens. She glanced at the paper and announced that she knew what to do: “I have to count these and write the letter that it is.” “No,” Juana corrected her, “the *number*.” Together, the girls counted the twelve objects depicted in the first problem. When Remaz asked, “How do you make a twelve?”, Juana replied, “I know—a one and a two.” When Remaz finished her assignment, Juana reminded her to write her name at the top.

The previous episode illustrates an example of *literacy brokering* among young children. Language and literacy brokering occurs when an individual seeks another’s help with a text, on an informal basis. Language and literacy brokering often occurs in immigrant and refugee families as children help family members, typically parents, with translation of oral and written language (Morales & Hanson, 2005). My previous research with Sudanese families has shown that brokers also provide a great deal of knowledge about written English and textual genres; they may broker *lexico-syntactic and graphophonic, cultural, and genre* aspects of texts (Perry, 2007b). This

example shows that, in addition to providing literacy brokering for parents, young children also broker for each other, and in doing so, they provide each other with important information about written language and valued literacy practices. When she helped Remaz sound out words, Juana brokered lexico-syntactic and graphophonic aspects of written English. When she pointed out the distinction between letters and numbers, she brokered an important emergent literacy concept. And when she reminded Remaz to put her name at the top of her homework, she emphasized the importance of a common school-related literacy practice. In this paper, I will demonstrate the ways in which Juana and other young Sudanese children act as literacy brokers for their peers.

Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

Emergent Literacy

Young children learn a great deal about literacy before they ever enter schools, as children experience people reading and writing for different purposes in their lives. 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 relationships¹ (Bissex, 1980; Purcell-Gates, 2000; Snow, 1983). This literacy learning occurs in natural settings, where children not only acquire concepts about print, but they also learn about the functions of print, the authentic ways in which people engage with print in their everyday lives. As such, literacy development is both a cognitive and a sociocultural process (Dyson, 1993, 2003; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Much of children's emergent literacy awareness is cognitive in orientation. Specifically, children gain phonological processing skills, such as the ability to identify words that rhyme; they gain knowledge about principles of print, such as knowledge of the alphabet or where to begin

¹ Of course, the degree to which children learn these concepts depends upon both the frequency of various types of literacy events in children's home lives and the types of texts that people read and write in children's worlds (Purcell-Gates, 1995, 1996).

reading on a page; and they begin to experiment with writing by engaging in pretend writing, invented spelling, and writing their own name (Bissex, 1980; Snow, 1983; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002). However, children's awareness nevertheless is shaped by the sociocultural milieu in which they observe and experience reading, writing, and different texts. Clay (1998) notes that what children learn "depends on the times in which they live, the country in which they live, and what each child chooses to attend to" (p. 85). In addition to shaping concepts about print that a child needs in order to read in a given society, children also learn about literacy practices, about the ways in which reading and writing can accomplish certain social goals (Gee, 2002; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates 1995; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984). Thus, emergent literacy involves not only the awareness and acquisition of skills related to the ability to read and write, but also the awareness and acquisition of specific practices related to literacy (Dyson, 2003; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates 1995; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004).

Family Literacy

Because of the influence of home and community on early literacy development, literacy researchers, schools, and policy-makers have increasingly turned their attention to issues of family literacy (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers & Smythe, 2005; Auerbach, 1989; Edwards, 1995; Gadsden, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2000). Family literacy perspectives suggest 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). 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).

The existing family literacy framework may be problematic in other ways (see Perry, in press, for further discussion). For example, family literacy research tends to focus almost entirely on a child's parents. In fact, the majority of this research has focused exclusively on mothers, although there have been calls to look more closely at paternal literacy skills (Gadsden, 2000). Some researchers also have begun looking at sibling literacy practices (Gregory, 2005; Volk & DeAcosta, 2000). In addition, research into parent-child interactions in the home tend to focus on storybook reading (Anderson, Smythe & Shapiro, 2005; Auerbach, 1989; Edwards, 1995; Gadsden, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2000), despite the fact that children and parents may have access to many different types of texts and engage in a variety of different types of literacy practices together.

Family literacy models also typically operate under the assumption that family literacy is unidirectional—that is, that children are influenced by parents. However, in many immigrant and refugee families, parents also are influenced by children, and children are influenced by other children. 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 young children specifically teaching their parents about English or about computer technology, for example.

Language and Literacy Brokering by Children

One important family literacy practice that occurs in many immigrant and refugee homes is language and literacy brokering (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). In families, language brokering occurs when one person, often a parent, asks another, usually a child, to mediate a conversation or a written text in some way. Thus, language brokering typically emphasizes informal translation work, often where power differentials exist between the players involved in the brokering activity, such as that between a parent and child (Halgunseth, 2003). Research has documented that

children commonly provide translation in immigrant households (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Orellana et al, 2003). However, thinking about children as brokers of language is a fairly recent development in the educational community. Educational researchers did not begin studying this phenomenon until the mid 1990s (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Studies of child language brokering are actually quite rare, especially studies that are grounded within ethnographic perspectives (Orellana et al, 2003). As Morales and Hanson (2005) note, “Little is known, at this point, about the process of language brokering and its effect on children and their families” (p. 473). Even less is known about *young* children acting as brokers, as existing studies have focused exclusively on children older than 10. In addition, these studies have examined brokering almost entirely within Latino communities, while a couple of studies examined Vietnamese and Chinese brokers (Morales & Hanson, 2005). There is a great need, therefore, to examine literacy brokering in other cultural and linguistic communities and contexts.

Despite the paucity of studies regarding child language brokering, Morales and Hanson (2005) note several important points of consensus among the available literature:

- Most immigrant children and youth act as language brokers
- Children may begin to broker as soon as one year after they arrive in the U.S., and immigrants often recall beginning to translate as young as 8 years old
- Brokering occurs in a variety of settings, and children broker for a variety of people, including parents, other family members, and school officials
- Child brokers are expected to help in “very complex, ‘adult-like’ situations—situations that may or may not be developmentally appropriate” (Morales & Hanson, 2005, p. 472).

Less consensus exists, however, about the impact of brokering on children and families. Some researchers assert that brokering can be burdensome or problematic for child brokers and for

family dynamics in immigrant communities, while others suggest that brokering is beneficial to children and their families (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Some scholars assert that child language brokering disrupts adults' assumed authority over children and thus may lead to negative outcomes such as increased anxiety, poor educational performance, and inhibited identity formation (Umaña-Taylor, 2003). In contrast, much of the existing research emphasizes the benefits to children and families when children act as language brokers. Although Tse (1996) found that some students disliked brokering, the vast majority of participants in her study indicated that they were proud of their abilities and believed that brokering helped them learn more about both English and their first languages. In contrast to Umaña-Taylor's assessment, Halgunseth (2003) argues that language brokering positively impacts cognitive, social, and cultural development of children who act as brokers. She argues that, through brokering, children often develop (1) a sense of social self-efficacy as they learn to communicate appropriately with a variety of people in different contexts, and (2) self-esteem as they positively contribute to the functioning of their families and households.

Much of the existing research related to brokering focuses on translation of oral language (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Yet, brokers also provide support for written language, and they draw upon a variety of linguistic, textual, and cultural resources as they negotiate meaning in different ways (Mazak, 2006; Orellana et al, 2003). Valenzuela (1999), for example, documented that "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). Examining brokering as a *literacy* phenomenon, therefore, is necessary.

My research among southern Sudanese refugee families in Michigan has demonstrated that even young children who cannot yet conventionally read and write are capable of providing

sophisticated literacy brokering to their parents (Perry, 2007b). These children provided *lexico-syntactic and graphophonic brokering* to their parents as they helped them read, spell, and pronounce words; they provided *cultural brokering* as they clarified the contents of various texts; and they provided *genre-related brokering*, as they explained the purpose, use, and features of different genres the families encountered. In this paper, however, I will demonstrate that these same young children also provided literacy brokering for their own peers. This brokering provided an important means of learning and practicing emerging literacy knowledge, and it also supplied unofficial, “under the radar” literacy support for classmates in school. The following research focus shaped this study: How are young Sudanese refugee children negotiating, making sense of, appropriating and/or transforming the U.S. school-based literacies and the literacy practices of their homes and communities?

Methodology

For this study, I used an ethnographic research design, relying upon ethnographic methods to collect and analyze data, in order to explore the Sudanese children’s sense-making around literacy and literacy practices.

*Participants*²

To locate appropriate families for the study, I used representative sampling through reputational case selection (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). The broader study from which this analysis is drawn examined the ways in which participants’ diverse backgrounds and experiences shaped their literacy practices. As a result, I selected families in which the parents had completed different levels of schooling, from primary school to professional degrees. Language considerations also played a role in participant selection. All three families spoke a dialect of Arabic

² I allowed participants to choose whether to use their real names or to remain anonymous in written representations of this study. All participants insisted that I use their real names. For further discussion of issues of anonymity and representation in ethnographic research, see Perry, 2007a.

at home, in addition to various other local Sudanese languages. Thus, another criterion for participation was that at least one adult in each family should speak English well enough to be able to communicate with me to a reasonable degree. All of the participants spoke English, although their levels of fluency varied. Because part of my research interest included children's sense-making around literacy during their first contacts with formal schooling in the U.S., a final criterion I used to choose participating families was that each family needed to have a young child in kindergarten or first grade.

The three participating families had between 2 and 7 children per family, some of whom were born in the U.S., while others were born in Sudan, Egypt, and/or Lebanon. From each family, I selected a kindergartner or first-grader as a focal child. (Viola's family had two children of the appropriate age, and I decided to use both as focal children.) In all, I focused on four children: a boy and a girl in kindergarten, and a boy and a girl in first grade. In Viola's and Akhlas' families, the focal children were the oldest children, while the focal child from Falabia's family was the second youngest child. Table 1 presents a comparison of the four focal children and their three families.

Table 1. *Focal children and their families.*

FOCAL CHILDREN	GRADE LEVEL	PARENTS	PARENT EDUCATION LEVEL
Boni Domoulouka	1 st grade	Mother: Viola Lupai	Law degree
Samuel Domoulouka	Kindergarten	Father: Isbon Domoulouka	Some college
Juana Gildo	1 st grade	Mother: Falabia Edward	Nursing degree
		Father: Primo Lukuat	High school
Remaz Abdelhrman	Kindergarten	Mother: Akhlas Kago	7th grade
		Father: Amin Abdelhrman	Some high school

Two brothers, Boni and Samuel Domoulouka, served as the focal boys in this study. Boni (short for Boniface) attended first grade, and Samuel was a kindergartner during the majority of data

collection. Boni struggled academically in school. He received extra instruction with a Title I reading specialist at school and was twice recommended for retention. Toward the end of the study, school officials began to suspect that he had a learning disability. Samuel, in contrast, enjoyed school and had an easy time learning to read and write. In fact, he was a better reader than many of his native-English speaking peers, and his kindergarten teacher reported that he was the most prolific writer in his class. Boni and Samuel's parents were both highly educated before coming to the U.S. Both parents in this family earned high school diplomas. Following in the footsteps of her father, who was a former Minister of Justice for the Sudan, Viola earned a law degree in Egypt. Isbon obtained some post-secondary education.

Juana Gildo was the second-to-youngest child in a family that included seven children. Juana had an older sister, two older brothers, and a younger sister. In addition, her two teenaged cousins lived with the family, as Juana's mother had cared for them after their parents had died in the Sudan. Academically, Juana was about average in her first grade classroom, although her levels of literacy development were behind national norms. Juana liked to accompany her older siblings to the public library, where she could use the computers and browse books about popular characters like Hannah Montana. Juana's parents, Falabia and Primo, had achieved moderate levels of education in Sudan. Following high school, Falabia earned a nursing degree and worked as a nurse for an international aid agency in Sudan. Primo completed high school and then went to work managing a shop in Khartoum.

The other focal girl, Remaz Abdelhrman, was at the very top of her kindergarten class. Remaz not only spoke without an accent, but her English vocabulary was so sophisticated that her teacher actually had no idea that Remaz spoke another language at home until I provided this information. Reading, writing and other academic learning came so easily to Remaz that, at the end

of her kindergarten year, her teacher recommended that she be placed in a mixed first and second grade classroom to ensure that she would be challenged academically. Remaz's parents had limited opportunities for schooling, in comparison with other families in the study. Her mother, Akhlas, completed 7th grade, but could not continue because her family could not afford the school fees. Her father, Amin, attended a year or two of high school.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study relied upon participant observation, interviews, and collection of artifacts. Data collection occurred over 18 months, from February 2005 to July 2006. I visited each family's home an average of once a week during this period, and I visited, on average, two focal children's classrooms per week during the 2005-2006 academic year.

Observations and participation occurred in a variety of settings, including family homes, community contexts, and public school classrooms. I wrote field notes in each setting, which described important information about each context, including: (a) physical descriptions of the homes, classrooms, and community environments; (b) general activities in which families and classes engaged; and (c) paraphrased and/or word-for-word transcriptions of conversations that occurred. These observations particularly focused on literacy events. Following Heath (1983), I define a *literacy event* as any activity that occurs around a printed text. Literacy events may involve reading, writing, or talking about a text, among others.

I also conducted a variety of interviews with participants in the study, including focal children, parents, and teachers. I tape recorded and transcribed all interviews. Some interviews were open-ended, eliciting information such as general oral histories of participants' lives in Africa, aspects of Sudanese culture, or teachers' perceptions of focal children's literacy development. Other

interviews were semi-structured, eliciting specific information regarding literacy practices in various contexts.

Finally, I collected and/or made copies of textual artifacts that were available to the refugees in a variety of contexts, such as religious texts, community bulletins, and homework assignments. I also collected examples of texts created by participants, such as notes, letters, homework assignments, and flyers for community events. Some artifacts were photographs of print or literacy events, which documented the literacy environment and captured moments in which interactions around texts took place (Hamilton, 2000).

Data Analysis

In order to determine the ways in which focal children negotiated and made sense of literacy practices, I analyzed emerging patterns through coding and theme analysis, using the AtlasTi qualitative data analysis software program (AtlasTi Scientific Software, 2007). In addition to allowing for interactive coding of a wide variety of data materials, AtlasTi's various features mediate different types of data analysis and model-building.

In coding, I first identified each literacy event represented in my data. For focal children, these data occurred primarily in field note observations. For each event, I coded the text and languages involved in the event, the purposes and functions for engaging with the text, and the social activity domains that contextualized the events, along with other contextual information. I then identified other important themes represented in the data. For example, significant literacy themes related to focal children included *using other children as resources*, *helping other children*, and *socializing around literacy*. In conjunction with an analysis of literacy brokering among the families (see Perry, 2007b), this theme analysis specifically pointed to the importance of brokering in learning about texts and literacy practices among Sudanese children.

Following the initial analysis, I focused on literacy events that featured literacy brokering, in which participants sought others who could help them with texts, or in which they helped others with a text. I identified all events, both observed and reported, that seemed to involve some sort of brokering. I then developed a series of data matrices that allowed me to more precisely code each event in order to understand the nature of the sense-making that was occurring around texts and literacy practices (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Researcher's Roles in the Community and the Study

Acknowledging the researcher's role in the community is essential in any ethnographic study. I held a variety of roles within Lansing's Sudanese community for over five years, including: tutor, mentor/culture broker, unofficial social worker, community board member, babysitter, bail bondswoman and researcher. I tutored orphaned Sudanese youth for five years, on both a paid and a volunteer basis. As a result, I was invited to join the board of the Southern Sudan Rescue and Relief Association (SSRRA), a small non-profit organization comprised of both Sudanese and U.S. members. In addition to these official roles, I also became an unofficial mentor. I acted as a cultural broker and community mentor for many refugees, who often called upon me to help them with transportation to appointments, filling out job applications, or financial advice. I also offered homework help and supplemental tutoring for the children in the families I was studying, as well as for the parents, who also were enrolled in various classes. In return, the families often invited me to participate in community events, such as graduation parties, weddings and funerals, and Sudanese holiday celebrations. These multiple roles, therefore, provided me with legitimate access to both in-school and out-of-school literacy practices in the Sudanese community. In the children's classrooms, I also played multiple roles, although I was more likely to simply observe in this context. However, I also provided one-on-one help to individual children, facilitated some small group activities,

proctored district-mandated exams, and even chaperoned a field trip. These multiple roles are grounded in my firm belief that researchers cannot just “take” from the communities they study, but they also must find meaningful ways to give back to their participants.

“My Friend, She Helped Me Wrote That”: Child Literacy Brokering

The children in this study engaged in a wide variety of brokering activities. They brokered many texts for their parents (see Perry, 2007b), and they also acted as brokers for their siblings and for their peers at school. In addition to acting as brokers, they also were the recipients of literacy brokering at times. The brokering done by the children can be divided into two broad categories, that related to lexico-syntactic/graphophonetic aspects of literacy and that related to literacy practices. *Lexico-syntactic and graphophonetic brokering* occurred as children helped each other write, spell, and read various texts. *Literacy practices brokering* occurred as they helped each other understand the use and features of various genres as well as how to engage in different practices that were valued in different contexts.

Writing

When children engaged in lexico-syntactic and graphophonetic brokering, they provided information to others about the basic skills of reading and writing. For example, when Boni was in kindergarten, Samuel watched his older brother do homework, and he expressed a keen interest in learning how to read and write himself. One day, when Boni was distracted, Samuel picked up his pencil and began attempting to copy the letter R, which was Boni’s assignment for the day. Samuel had completed all of the R with the exception of the leg, so that it looked like the letter P. Instead of getting angry at his brother for defacing his homework, Boni used his own pencil as a pointer and explained to Samuel how to complete the R. This instance of brokering involved Boni passing on information to Samuel regarding how to properly form letters.

Helping each other to write was a common brokering activity among these young children. When Juana showed me the list of names that she had written in her diary, she explained, “My friend, she helped me wrote that.” I often observed the focal children and their siblings as they helped each other spell words. This frequently happened in Boni and Samuel’s family, as Samuel’s literacy development quickly outpaced that of his older brother. In May of Boni’s first grade year and Samuel’s kindergarten year, Boni’s homework required him to read a passage about China and answer some questions. In response to one question, Boni wanted to write, “China is very big,” but he did not know how to spell *China*. Samuel had been listening to Boni’s work, and he said, “I how to know spell China. C-H, because my teacher learned us the C-H, like /ch/, like ‘choo-choo’!” Samuel then unsuccessfully attempted to help Boni spell out “very”. When I intervened and told him that there was a Y on the end, Samuel explained to Boni, “Y is very hard. Sometimes it makes /I/.” In this example, Samuel drew upon knowledge he had learned in school about letter-sound relationships in order to help his brother spell. In fact, the boys’ mother reported to me that Samuel sometimes helped Boni practice his weekly spelling words, too.

Writing names—their own and those of friends and family—is a common and important activity in which young children engage as their abilities to read and write emerge. I often observed the focal children practicing their names and the names of family and friends, both at home and at school, and name-writing was something that the children brokered for each other. Juana, for example, often helped her younger sister, Diana, spell her name. Diana was in Head Start at the time, and she sometimes had homework that consisted of practicing forming letters. One November afternoon, Diana brought a worksheet home and was attempting to write her name at the top. Juana explained to me, “She needs help writing her name,” and pointed to the space on the top of the paper where Diana’s name was supposed to go. In the name space, Diana wrote a letter that looked like an

O, saying that was her name. Not satisfied with this, Juana went into the other room and returned with a piece of Diana's artwork from Head Start on which the teacher had Diana's name. Juana explained to Diana that this was how her name was written, not how Diana had written it. Diana insisted that the letter was her name. Juana turned to her older siblings, who supported her claim that this was not Diana's name, and that it indeed looked like an O.

Samuel, too, helped his peers write their names. In Samuel's kindergarten classroom, children were encouraged to "write the room" during their writing center time, and copying down friends' names from the posted class list or from name tags at the children's seats was a popular activity. Samuel enjoyed writing his friends' names, and as a result, he could spell several of his friends' names or knew exactly where to look for the spellings. Samuel's table-mate, Stephen³, really struggled with learning to read and write, and in November, he still could not write his own name. During writing time one morning, Stephen stated that he did not know how to write his name. Overhearing this, Samuel said, "S!" He then proceeded to help Stephen write his name. Thus, as Samuel and Juana helped other children write, they drew upon knowledge they were learning in school, brokering these literacy skills for others as they simultaneously reinforced their own learning.

Reading

The focal children also emerged as readers during the course of this study, and they engaged in reading-related brokering as well as writing-related brokering. Among all the children, Juana most often engaged in this type of brokering, particularly for her classmates at school. Interestingly, Juana was not the strongest reader in her class—in fact, she was just below average in reading ability among her classmates. However, Juana was a social butterfly who appeared to learn best when she was able to interact with others, and other children in the class liked Juana and sought her

³ A pseudonym. All names of children who are not from participating families have been changed.

help. Whenever a classmate asked, “What does this say?”, Juana was more than happy to help that child read the text. In May, for example, Juana and her friend Amanda were browsing through books in the reading center, where they were supposed to be reading independently and silently to themselves. Juana, who was a much stronger reader than Amanda, sat down next to her friend and began helping her to read. Juana helped Amanda with specific words. For example, when Amanda mis-read a sentence, Juana stopped her and said, “No, ‘we slide down the hill.’” Later that morning, when Juana and her friend Michelle were supposed to be pair-reading in another center, Michelle pulled a fuzzy pink coin purse out of her pocket and showed it to Juana. The purse had the word “Angel” printed on it in sparkly rhinestones. The girls puzzled over what this word said and then together read, “Angel!”

In addition to decoding text, child brokers sometimes helped each other pronounce words correctly. During independent reading centers, Juana again helped Amanda read and pronounce words. She looked over Amanda’s shoulder as she read, performing a semi-choral reading with Amanda. When Amanda came to the word *math*, she pronounced it “map”. Juana stopped Amanda and corrected her pronunciation (although, like many Sudanese children, she pronounced the *th* digraph as /f/). “It’s just like *bath*,” Juana explained, “but it’s *math*.” As they had with writing-related brokering, the reading-related brokering allowed these children to practice their own emerging literacy skills as they simultaneously helped their peers and siblings to read and write.

Aspects of Genres

The young Sudanese children in this study clearly helped each other, their siblings, and their peers with basic literacy skills. What is more interesting, however, is that these young children also brokered less explicit literacy knowledge related to literacy practices. As they brokered, these children exhibited their emerging understanding of sophisticated knowledge related to written

genres and to how people engage in literate practices in various contexts. Elsewhere (Perry, 2007b), I have shown that these young children helped their parents with various aspects of written genres, such as the genre's purpose, its use, and its various textual features. My data show that the children also brokered genre features, the use of different genres, and broader contextualized literacy practices for their peers.

Remaz, for example, frequently demonstrated that she understood how various texts were used in different contexts. In her kindergarten class, children frequently engaged in pretend play about restaurants. The children would pretend to take each other's orders; most would carry a clipboard with them upon which they would scribble or pretend to write. Remaz, however, carefully sounded out the words in each food item and drew a line to separate each person's order, demonstrating her understanding of the purpose and use of written food orders (and the importance of keeping them separate!). She was able to help her peers understand the features and use of textual genres, too. In March, Remaz's friend Rachel brought over a little notepad that she had purchased in the class store with points she had earned. Rachel showed Remaz that she had written the phone numbers of some of her friends in the notebook. Remaz pointed to one number and asked, "Whose phone number is that?" The girl replied that it was the number of one of the boys in the class. Remaz replied, "You need to write his name," and she explained that Rachel would otherwise forget whose number was whose. Thus, Remaz provided important information about address books and other contact information to Rachel; she indicated that a phone number is not sufficient without additional information. As she explained this, Remaz brokered both the expected features and the use of address books and written contact information for Rachel. Understanding how to actually *use* a particular genre is an important part of being able to engage in a literacy practice (Perry, 2007b). Thus, Remaz's brokering may have furthered Rachel's emerging understanding of textual genres

and how to use them.

Storybook Reading

Other Sudanese children also brokered important aspects of literacy practices for their siblings and peers. One of these brokered practices was the reading of storybooks—a practice that is highly valued in middle-class homes and in U.S. classrooms, but not one that was typically found in the Sudanese homes I observed. At school, Juana and the other Sudanese children quickly learned that reading storybooks is a valued practice in some contexts. Even before she could read fluently herself, Juana engaged in many pretend readings of picture books with her younger sister, Diana. Diana then wanted to “read” the books for herself, and Juana brokered these events. In December, for example, Diana wanted to read David Shannon’s (1999) book, *David Goes to School*, a favorite among the focal children. Diana opened the book to the title page and began to pretend-read. Juana stopped her and said, “Not this page.” She reached across and turned to the first page of the story, and told Diana to begin reading there. For each page, Juana whispered the words to Diana, who would repeat (as best she could) what Juana had said. A week later, Diana selected the same book to pretend-read to Juana. She settled herself next to Juana and again began repeating sentences after her. On one page, David’s teacher tells him, “Shhhh!” Juana said, “Diana, do this one!” She put her finger to her lips and showed her how to make the “shhhh” sound. Juana’s brokering with Diana involved teaching her about a literacy practice that is highly valued in U.S. schools—reading storybooks. In these examples, Juana was doing more than simply reading with her sister. As she helped her sister pretend-read the book, Juana provided Diana with important emergent literacy knowledge about reading books, such as on which page the story begins (i.e., not the title page) and the direction of print. She also introduced Diana to story language and explicitly explained how to read with expression—both important skills that will help Diana when she gets to school.

Digital Technologies and Texts

Digital technologies were new to these Sudanese families, as the parents reported that they had not had access to computers before they came to the U.S. Although Juana's family was the only one among the participating families with a working computer and Internet connection, all of the children had access, in varying degrees, to computers at school. In fact, Juana's sister Julia and cousin Chris went to a middle school that provided laptops to each student and required many homework assignments to be completed online. Thus, children in these families, and particularly in Juana's family, were learning how to use computers and digital texts, and they were responsible for passing on this information to their siblings, as the parents had very limited experience with computers themselves (in fact, Juana's siblings taught Remaz's mother how to use email).

On several occasions, I observed as Juana was the recipient of brokering around digital texts and technologies. Her older brothers, Godfrey and Emmanuel, often helped her use the computer, both at home and when the children ventured to the public library. In September, the siblings had gone to the library, and Juana wanted to play a Tom and JerryTM game that she saw Emmanuel playing. When the game opened on her computer, Juana asked, "What I gotta do?" Emmanuel came over to her computer and demonstrated the game to her. "Keep on pressing this," he said, as he showed her how to right-click the mouse. At home six months later, Juana was playing an online game in which she was able to dress up a character from one of her favorite TV shows. When Juana needed to scroll up and down the screen—a skill she had not yet learned—Emmanuel showed her how to do this using the scroll bar at the side of the screen. Thus, Juana's older brother brokered for her by showing her how to navigate computer technology, such as mouse buttons, and the features of digital texts, such as scroll bars.

Once she had gained a certain level of facility with computers herself, Juana in turn began to

brokered these texts for Diana. In June, I observed the girls together at the family's computer, Diana perched on Juana's lap. Juana was teaching Diana how to use various websites and to play online games associated with some of their favorite shows on the Disney Channel and the Cartoon Network. I watched as Juana pointed to the places on the screen that Diana needed to click with the mouse, showing her how to close one window and go back to where she had been before. Upon seeing this, Falabia commented, "I'm proud of them because they know how to use the computer." She added that her children were quite adept at using the computer, and that her children's skills far surpassed her own.

School Literacy Practices

In addition to brokering everyday literacy practices, the children also brokered important school practices for each other and their peers. Samuel and Juana most often acted as literacy brokers for their classmates. Samuel, as I have already described, frequently helped his tablemate, Stephen, with reading and writing tasks. He also brokered other aspects of texts for Stephen. In January, for example, Stephen held up a worksheet and stated that it was finished. Samuel glanced at the worksheet and told Stephen, "You have to put your name on it." Thus, Samuel brokered the features and use of a worksheet, a typical text found in U.S. schools. In doing so, he reminded Stephen that putting one's name on top of a worksheet was an important school literacy practice, the purpose of which was to help the teacher know who had completed the assignment.

Homework

The doing of homework is a valued literacy practice in most U.S. schools. The focal children in this study regularly brought home homework from their kindergarten and first grade classrooms. The parents in these families helped their children with these assignments to the best of their abilities, but they often struggled with vocabulary and directions, as well as with understanding the

cultural expectations embedded in some assignments, such as “Turn off the TV Tuesdays” (see Perry, 2007b, for further discussion). Thus, siblings and peers became an important homework resource. Juana, in particular, took this responsibility very seriously. When Diana began to attend Head Start, Juana said to me, “Diana is going to have homework every day, and I have to help her because you won’t be here.”

The Sudanese parents also reinforced this expectation that siblings would help each other and learn from each other. When Remaz’s younger brother, Remon, pestered her one day while she did her homework, Remaz’s mother called Remon over to her. “Next year,” she said to him, “you will go to kindergarten, so you have to learn from your sister.” To emphasize the point, Remaz added, “And you’re going to have *hard* homework!” This emphasis on siblings teaching each other appears to be an effective strategy, given the parents’ own unfamiliarity with U.S. schools. Sudanese parents’ expectations that siblings help each other with homework may seem strange in comparison to U.S. schools’ common expectations that parents supervise and help with homework. The parents reported that sibling homework assistance was a common occurrence in Sudan. Viola, for example, explained that she studied with her siblings: “Three of us sit together, till morning. We study. And uh, he tried to help me, I tried to help him like that, you know.”

Brokering related to aspects of genre, such as address books, reading storybooks, using computers, and engaging in expected school activities have less to do with the mechanics of reading and writing and more to do with literacy practices. In brokering literacy practices, these young children were demonstrating their knowledge of how texts function in the world and how people use them to accomplish certain goals. In addition to basic literacy skills, this emerging knowledge of literacy practices is equally important in young children’s literacy development (Purcell-Gates, 2000; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Although Remaz, Samuel and Juana were still on the periphery of

these practices, their brokering may have allowed them to reinforce their own knowledge and practices as they also helped other young children become aware of them.

Who Brokers?

All of the focal children in this study acted as literacy brokers for adults and for children (Perry, 2007b). Some of the focal children, however, brokered for siblings and peers more often than others. Some received child brokering more than others. Table 2 shows which children brokered and received brokering in various contexts.

Table 2. *Children who brokered for others and/or received child brokering.*

Child	Broker for Adults	Broker for Siblings/Peers		Recipient of Brokering	
	Home	Home	School	Home	School
Boni	X	X		X	X
Juana	X	X	X	X	X
Samuel	X	X	X	X	
Remaz	X		X		

At home, I observed that Boni, Juana, and Samuel all brokered for their siblings. Boni and Samuel's brokering for each other, however, exhibited an interesting pattern. Boni helped his brother with writing early in the study, before Samuel began kindergarten. Once he began school, however, Samuel's literacy development quickly began to surpass that of his brother, and Samuel then began acting as a literacy broker for Boni, who struggled a great deal with reading and writing. Juana also presented an interesting case, because she was the only child I observed who brokered for her peers in her home, as well as for siblings. This occurred because Remaz and her family were frequent visitor's to Juana's home.

At school, I observed all of the children, with the exception of Boni, acting as literacy brokers for their peers, although Juana certainly engaged in the most brokering at school. I often observed her helping her peers with literacy tasks in the classroom. Most of these brokering events,

however, were unsanctioned—that is, they went “under the radar” in the classroom. Juana frequently helped her friend Amanda, a struggling reader, during a literacy center where the children were supposed to be reading silently and independently. One morning, Juana’s teacher was supervising children at the pencil sharpener while the rest were supposed to be opening their literacy workbooks. While this was going on, Juana went and helped several of her classmates locate the required page. There was some problem with one girl’s workbook, which Juana brought to the front of the room. She unsuccessfully attempted to get the teacher’s attention, and then returned to circling the room and helping her classmates find the page.

In other classrooms, teachers appeared to draw upon children as resources for peer support for literacy tasks. Boni’s teacher, for example, often paired him with a child who could help him, although this sometimes backfired and hindered his progress (Perry, 2006). The teachers also noted the children’s willingness to help their peers. Samuel’s teacher, for example, reported that when other children asked for help, “Samuel will be there [saying], ‘I told you it’s...’” Boni’s teacher also commented that Boni relied on one little boy, in particular, for help: “Little Andrew next to him has been real helpful to him lately, and you know, kind of helping him when he needs a little bit of help.”

In fact, in comparison with the other focal children in the study, Boni was more likely to be the recipient of child literacy brokering than were the others, as a result of the difficulties he experienced with literacy. Boni received a great deal of brokering related to basic reading and writing skills, but his peers also helped him understand how different genres were structured. Like many of his first grade peers, Boni became interested in chapter books partway through the year, despite the fact that these books were beyond his reading capabilities. He appeared to be particularly intrigued by the number of chapters these books contained, although he frequently confused

chapters with pages. During one class visit to the library in April, Boni checked out a book in the Magic Tree House series (Osborne, 1993). He sat down at a table, opened up the book and announced, "I'm going to read this book!" Another little boy at the table also had a Magic Tree House book. He pointed to Boni's book and said that his book was the second one in the series, while the little boy's own book was the first one in the series. Boni asked him, "Do you know how many chapters?" The little boy replied, "Ten. All of them have 10 chapters." Boni disagreed, opening up the book and pointing to the 62, which was actually the page number of the 10th chapter. The children's disagreement helped Boni understand particular features of the genre of chapter books. Boni clearly already knew that these books contained tables of contents, but he was not clear about how to make sense of these tables.

Although Boni was the most frequent recipient of child literacy brokering at school, Juana also was helped by her peers at times. Although Juana was about average in her literacy achievement among her classmates, her development lagged behind national norms. At the end of first grade, Juana, like many of her classmates, was only reading at an early first-grade level, most likely due to the fact that the teacher had taken maternity leave during the middle of the year, and the class had been taught by several different substitute teachers. Juana frequently brokered for peers whose literacy achievement was behind hers, and she also turned to more advanced friends for help when she needed it. In February, for example, Juana and her classmates had selected books to keep through the Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program. The children in the class shared and compared their selections, and Juana began browsing through her friend's book. She held it up to the girl and asked, "What does this say?" Her friend read the text and replied, "But not me." Juana then returned to reading through the text.

Thus, while these children clearly brokered for each other, they also could be the recipients of brokering at times, illustrating the fact that they were not yet fluent readers, writers, or practitioners of literacy. At times, these children could pass on sophisticated literacy knowledge to their siblings and peers, and at other times, they needed help with this same knowledge. Nevertheless, brokering appeared to be an important means of sense-making around literacy for these children.

Insights & Implications

This study's findings offer important insights and implications regarding child literacy brokering, family literacy, and peer literacy interactions in U.S. schools.

Child Literacy Brokering

In the U.S., it is often assumed that parents, grandparents, or other caretakers provide homework help and emergent literacy support for young children. While this may be true in many middle-class European-American homes, research has demonstrated that siblings, even those very close in age, provide significant literacy support for young children in some cultural communities (Gregory, 2005; Volk & DeAcosta, 2000). The results of this study contribute to these findings, lending support to Rogoff's (2003) claim that family roles and relationships do not look the same across all cultural communities. Child literacy brokering appears to be a natural extension of Sudanese children's regular roles, responsibilities, and contributions to household functioning.

In many African cultures, children take on great responsibility within their families very early in life (Rogoff, 2003), where even young children are expected to help with cooking, cleaning, child care, and other household duties. In other cultures, too, children actively contribute to household functioning (Orellana, 2001; Rogoff, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999), for example, found that Mexican immigrant youth served as tutors/teachers, advocates, and surrogate

parents within their families. The Sudanese children in this study also reflected this cultural pattern, taking on family responsibilities that may differ from children in other cultural communities. Thus, literacy brokering seemed to be a natural, and potentially important, extension of family responsibilities for the young children in these Sudanese families.

Family Literacy

Literacy brokering, as my data suggest, is often a matter of family literacy. The Sudanese children in this study sometimes gathered around different texts, working together to make sense of them. These findings, thus, help to expand our current conception of family literacy. They challenge the one-way transmission model of family literacy, which suggests that family literacy only involves children learning from parents and other elders. Instead, these child brokering data offer support for intergenerational models (Gadsden, 2000) of family literacy, in which literacy learning can be multidirectional. That is, parents certainly influence children's literacy development, but children may also influence their parents' literacy practices as well (Perry, 2007b), and children may influence their peers' literacy development. Literacy also may be impacted by more than just the family members living in a particular household.

One important implication of this finding is that educators and family literacy programs must account for these multidirectional family literacy relationships as they plan and implement family literacy programs. Siblings, cousins, and other peers may provide the majority of support for literacy development and for homework, particularly in immigrant and refugee communities in which parents may have limited, if any, English language abilities. Developing family literacy programs that include these literacy "guiding lights" (Gregory, 2005) is essential.

Learning About School Practices

Child brokering also appeared to be an important means by which Sudanese children learned

about homework, classroom expectations, and other literacy practices that are specific to U.S. schools. The culture of schooling is unique, but it is far more similar to the culture of European-American, middle-class Americans than it is to the cultures of more marginalized communities. The Sudanese families in this study were new to the cultures of the U.S. and the school system. Although the parents all had attended schools in the Sudan, their experiences were different from those of their children in Michigan schools. Thus, the children could not necessarily rely upon their parents to find out what was expected of them in school; their siblings and peers, on the other hand, could provide this knowledge. Child literacy brokering, therefore, was an important means by which these refugee children could gain access to important knowledge about school practices, both at home and in school.

Because child brokering was a normal and expected part of everyday life for these children, Juana and the other focal children likely brought this cultural practice with them when they entered their U.S. classrooms. The expectation that siblings and peers should collaborate, help and teach each other likely was one cultural fund of knowledge (Gonzales et al, 1995) these children brought with them to school. Thus, brokering was a practice they imported from one context into another.

These findings suggest that educators should draw upon child brokers as a significant classroom resource. Children from some cultural communities come to school more oriented to learn from peers than from adults (Rogoff, 2003). They also come to school with extensive experience as caregivers, teachers, tutors, and brokers (Orellana, 2001; Rogoff, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Teachers can draw upon these students' strengths and funds of knowledge to become peer tutors for students who may struggle with reading and writing, or who may still be developing their English language capabilities. Research has demonstrated that peer tutoring and other collaborative learning opportunities can positively impact student achievement and motivation (Simmons, Fuchs,

Fuchs, Mathes & Hodge, 1995; Slavin, 1996, 1999). Yet most peer tutoring and collaborative learning situations are structured by the teacher and involve specific academic assignments. In contrast, literacy brokering is informal and is usually unobserved or even unsanctioned by the teacher. Indeed, Juana—the child who most often brokered in her classroom—often got in trouble for being out of her seat and for being “a chatterbox” when she was helping her classmates. In addition, peer tutoring and collaborative learning activities usually involve academic activities that are planned by the teacher. Literacy brokering, on the other hand, sometimes involves help with academic tasks such as seatwork or reading in a literacy center, but it is equally likely to involve literacy activities that do not necessarily relate to academic tasks, such as explaining about address book entries or how to navigate a website. Rather than punishing children for engaging in this “under the radar” brokering, teachers should encourage children to serve as literacy resources for each other—just as adults do in the real world.

Directions for Future Research

Child language and literacy brokering is a phenomenon that has received increased scholarly attention in recent years, although studies are still few and far between. Researchers must continue to examine child brokering, particularly in other cultural communities; most studies have been conducted in Spanish-speaking communities, with one or two studies in Asian-American communities. Child brokering may differ across communities and contexts, and future research needs to explore these variations. In addition, future research must more fully explore the impact of brokering on young children’s literacy development and school achievement. In her survey research, Tse (1996) found that bilingual youth believed brokering helped them learn about language(s), culture(s), and academic content. Valdés (2003) even argues that brokering is a form of giftedness among bilingual students. Dorner, Orellana and Li-Grining (2007) recently demonstrated that

bilingual child brokers had better scores on fifth- and sixth-grade standardized reading tests than their peers who did not broker. These studies have been conducted on older children, however, and research is needed to explore the impact of brokering on very young children's literacy development and academic achievement: Does brokering impact academic achievement? Does it impact literacy development? If so, how? The children themselves recognized the importance of siblings and peers as literacy brokers. As Boni explained, "If you don't know how to read, you read with your friend."

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“Let me show you how to do the homework:” Child literacy brokering in and out of school

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Vignette: Remaz & Juana



Emergent & Family Literacy

- Ø Emergent literacy
 - | Children learn much about literacy before entering school (Clay, 1998; Teale & Sulzby, 1986)
 - Concepts of print
 - Functions of & beliefs/values about print → practices
- Ø Family/intergenerational literacy
 - | Continuum of acquired abilities & social constructs that influence literacy (Gadsden, 2000)
 - | Siblings can be “guiding lights” (Gregory, 2000)

Language & Literacy Brokering

- Ø Informal translation work (Morales & Hanson, 2005), including oral & written language
- Ø Draw upon linguistic, textual, and cultural resources to negotiate meaning (Mazak, 2006; Orellana et al, 2003)
- Ø Limitations of current research:
 - | Focus on translation
 - | Examines Spanish-speaking communities

Brokering Among Sudanese Families

- Ø Perry, K. (2007). *More than Language Translation: Culture, Text and Genre Aspects of Literacy Brokering among Sudanese Refugees.*
- Ø Lexico-syntactic/graphophonic knowledge
 - Encoding & decoding of English
- Ø Cultural knowledge
 - Context, expectations, beliefs & values
- Ø Written genre knowledge
 - | Purposes, functions, features of texts

Research Focus

- Ø How are young Sudanese refugee children negotiating, making sense of, appropriating and/or transforming the U.S. school-based literacies and the literacy practices of their homes and communities?

Methodology

- Ø Data Collection
 - Participant observation in homes, community, and schools
 - Semi-structured interviews
 - Artifact collection
- Ø Unit of analysis: Literacy (brokering) event (Heath, 1983)
- Ø Data Analysis
 - Coding of brokering events
 - Developing data matrices
 - Derivation of brokering categories
 - Identification of themes
 - AtlasTi software

Participants

- Ø Reputational selection (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999)
- Ø Three families, all sojourner in Middle Eastern countries (Egypt and Lebanon)
- Ø Families differed by parents' level of education
- Ø Focal children in kindergarten and first grade

PARENT	EDUCATION LEVEL	FOCAL CHILD(REN)	GRADE
M: Viola	Law degree	Boni	1 st
F: Isbon	Some college	Samuel	Kindergarten
M: Falabia	Nursing degree	Juana	1 st
F: Primo	High school		
M: Akhlias	7 th grade	Remaz	Kindergarten
F: Amin	Some high school		

Child literacy brokering

- Ø Children brokered for others *and* received brokering from other children
- Ø Two types of brokering:
 - Lexico-syntactic/graphophonic
 - Writing, spelling, and reading various texts
 - Literacy practices
 - Understanding use and features of various genres
 - Engaging in literacy practices that were valued in different contexts

Lexico-Syntactic/Graphophonic: Writing

- Ø Forming letters
- Ø Spelling words
 - China, very
- Ø Writing names
- Ø Occurred both at home (siblings) and at school (peers)



Lexico-Syntactic/Graphophonic: Reading

- Ø Juana most often engaged in this type of brokering
- Ø Helping peers read during centers
 - "It's just like *bath*, but it's *math*."
- Ø Brokering occurred "under the radar"
 - Not sanctioned by teacher

Literacy Practices: Aspects of Genres

- o Illustrated sophisticated knowledge related to written genres and literacy practices
- o Remaz and the address book
 - “Whose phone number is that? You need to write his name.”

Literacy Practices: Storybook Reading

- o Sibling-sibling storybook reading was common
- o Juana brokered for younger sister
 - Which page to start reading on
 - Matching text to pictures
 - Pretend-reading with prosody



Literacy Practices: Digital Technologies and Texts



- o How to navigate websites and online games
 - “Keep on pressing this”
- o Digital text features
 - Scroll bars, icons, buttons, mouse

Literacy Practices: School Literacies

- o Samuel and Juana most often brokered for peers at school
 - “You have to put your name on it”
- o Homework—a highly valued practice
- o Parents reinforced expectations that siblings should help each other
 - “Next year, you will go to kindergarten, and you will have to learn from your sister”

Who brokers?

- o All focal children acted as brokers
 - Some brokered for peers and siblings more often
 - Some received brokering more than others

Child	Broker for Adults	Broker for Siblings/Peers		Recipient of Brokering	
	Home	Home	School	Home	School
Boni	X	X		X	X
Juana	X	X	X	X	X
Samuel	X	X	X	X	
Remaz	X		X		

Insights & Implications: Family Literacy

- o Family literacy roles & relationships do not look the same across all cultures
 - In some, children take on great family responsibilities at an early age (Rogoff, 2003)
 - Siblings (even very young ones!) often provide significant literacy support
- o Literacy brokering is a matter of *family literacy*
 - Literacy learning is multidirectional and goes beyond nuclear family
 - Educators must account for these multidirectional relationships in planning family literacy programs

Insights & Implications: School Literacy Practices

- o Children provide knowledge about school literacy practices
 - Refugee parents may have limited knowledge about U.S. schools
 - Doing homework, classroom expectations, etc
- o Children import brokering practices into classrooms
 - Teachers can capitalize on these funds of knowledge that some children bring
- o Brokering is different from peer tutoring
 - Teachers can sanction informal literacy brokering and help students understand when it's appropriate

Directions for Research

- o Expand research into other cultural communities
 - How does brokering vary across communities?
- o Explore impact of child brokering on literacy development & academic achievement