"I learned how to spell English on Channel 18":

Television, language, and literacies in Sudanese refugee families

Kristen H. Perry
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
University of Kentucky
341 Dickey Hall
Lexington, KY 40506
Email: kristen.perry@uky.edu
Phone: (859) 257-3836

Annie M. Moses
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

This ethnographic study explored the ways in which media, particularly television, shaped English language and literacy development among Sudanese refugees in Michigan. Three families with young children participated in this study. Data collection included participant observation, interviews, and collection of artifacts over 18 months. Results indicated that television was an important media source for the families, although viewing patterns differed. Specifically, television provided the families with the means to maintain connections with their Sudanese culture and heritage, support their religious expression, and learn about the U.S. context. In addition, both parents and children actively used television as a resource for literacy and language learning, and it appeared to influence children's literacy practices by shaping their interactions with books and computers. However, results also indicate a tension between the families' belief that television was an important resource and their worries that too much television could be detrimental. Implications for educators are discussed.

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One April morning, Remaz, a six-year-old Sudanese refugee, sat in front of the television,

watching *Arthur* on PBSKids. In front of her, she had a piece of paper and some colored pencils.

Remaz watched the show for a few minutes and then put her pencil to the paper. She began drawing

a face and announced, "I'm making Arthur!" She added Arthur's distinctive ears and eyeglasses to

the face she had drawn (see Figure 1). As she drew, Remaz's attention continued to be drawn to the

episode, the plot of which revolved around the characters trying to invent a new holiday. As she

drew, she listened to the characters' discussion and commented, "They made a good idea!" Later

that day, Remaz took a trip to the public library, where she signed up to use one of the computers in

the children's section. These computers had Internet access, and they also were loaded with

children's software related to educational television programming like *Arthur* and *Barney &*

Friends. Remaz immediately selected the program "Arthur's Carnival" and played a variety of

games before moving to another *Arthur* program, "Arthur's Brainteasers." She spent an hour on this

computer, completely engrossed in *Arthur*-related activities.

Remaz and the other Sudanese refugees in this study had only lived in the U.S. a short time.

Yet, like other American children, they watched television, which was one aspect of the

sociocultural milieu that shaped these children's language and literacy practices. As this episode

suggests, television viewing appeared to influence some of Remaz's literacy choices and literate

activities. When she went to the library, for example, Remaz chose to interact with educational

software based on a favorite television program. In this paper, we will show that Sudanese refugee

children watched a variety of educational and entertainment programming, and that these shows

appeared to shape the literacy choices and literacy learning the children made when they interacted

with books and digital media. Thus, television was an important language and literacy resource for these children, just as it was for their parents, who believed that television helped them to learn English.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural perspectives on language and literacy suggest that learning a language or becoming literate involves more than cognitive processes. That is, language and literacy are social practices that involve participation in social activities and their attendant beliefs, values, and attitudes (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Gee, 1996; Hymes, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1994; Street, 2001). As a result, both children and adults can, and do, learn a great deal about literacy outside of formal instructional contexts (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Perry, 2007; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004). For example, emergent and family literacy perspectives suggest that home and community environments provide children with a great deal of information about the world of print, including the purposes and functions of literacy (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). These contexts impact children's literacy achievement in school, and they shape children's everyday literacy practices. Likewise, adults also adopt new literacy practices as they change contexts, and they rely on a variety of resources to learn about languages, texts, and practices in these contexts (Perry, 2007b; Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 2001).

Television is one aspect of context that shapes children and adults' literacy practices (e.g., Buckingham, 1993; Dyson, 2003; Robinson, 1997). Watching television is a social practice in itself (Miller and Goodnow, 1995), and one in which children actively engage with material presented on screen. Some have argued that television viewing is merely a passive activity; however, research has shown that children can actively engage with television and other media (the active viewing model; for a review, see Huston & Wright, 1998). Children, as viewers, have their own interests and

knowledge that they bring to the viewing context, and the viewing context, in turn, influences children's interest and knowledge. Through these active interactions with television, children can actively learn.

Literacy as Social Practice

Literacy is a social practice that is shaped by social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors (see, for example, Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Street, 2001). As a result, literacy looks different among different people, in different places, and in different historical times. Context, therefore, plays an important role in shaping literacy in a particular community. In addition, communities—and the individuals that inhabit them—have many different purposes and uses for literacies in their daily lives. Because of the variety of literacy practices that exist both across and within communities, literacy scholars increasingly speak of literacies as *multiple* rather than of literacy as a single entity (Street, 2001).

Television not only incorporates different literacies into its content that children may see every day, but the medium itself represents a type of literacy. In order to understand what they see on television, viewers are required to make sense of information from different modes of communication (visual, audio, etc.), and thus multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). In addition, television remains a changing technology, along with other advancing technologies, and increasingly, children are becoming multiple media users (Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella, 2003). As the opening vignette demonstrates, an overlap exists between different media's content, and children often seek out different media based on common material (Crane & Chen, 2003; Jordan, 2005). Knowing how to use each medium and work across media also involves knowledge of multiliteracies. Although theoretically related to the concept of multiple literacies, the construct of *multiliteracies* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) focuses on modes of

representation "much broader than language alone" (p. 5). Multiliteracies focuses on the ways in which meaning is made in multi-modal ways, "in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). Understanding multiliteracies and multimodal ways of making meaning have taken on greatly increased importance in this age of rapidly changing digital technologies.

Emergent, Family & Adult Literacies

Young children learn a great deal about literacy before they ever enter schools, as they experience people reading and writing for different purposes in their lives. For example, Clay (1998) demonstrated that children gain concepts of print at home, such as print directionality and how to hold a book. They also acquire knowledge of written registers, vocabulary, and letter-sound relationships[1] (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. In addition, children may learn about and interact with different literacies in early child care and education settings, where providers incorporate literacy materials and experiences in the everyday routines and more formal activities there. With regard to television, children may see print on screen, characters modeling different literacy practices, and literacy content specifically designed for young viewers. Researchers have noted that literacy messages and content exist in children's programming and, depending on the nature of the content, children gain literacy and language skills from viewing such programs (for full review of the relationships between television and young children's literacy learning, see Moses, 2008; also see *Television, Children, and Literacy* section that follows). Thus, emergent literacy involves not only the awareness and acquisition of skills

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[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, 1996).

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; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002).

Because of the influence on 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; Gadsden, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2000), arguing that a child's family provides the foundation for his or her literacy development. 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 (e.g., 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).

Much recent ethnographic research has illustrated the rich and varied ways that individuals, families, and communities practice and value literacy (for example, see Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers & Smythe, 2005; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995, 2007). This research has demonstrated that families have access to what Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) term "funds of knowledge" that underlie productive everyday life, such as the performance of household activities or the maintenance of social and community networks. Some of these funds of knowledge, of course, are not print-based, but children nevertheless draw upon these funds as they participate in formal learning, including literacy learning, at school. With regard to media, television remains a pervasive presence in the majority of homes in the U.S., and because of this, families' funds of knowledge and interests may connect with content on television and other media. Opportunities may

exist, then, to bridge families' knowledge and interest related to television and other out-of-school literacies with what children learn in school and with in-school literacies.

Despite this rich body of work, educational researchers have noted that the concept of family literacy is largely based upon White, middle-class definitions of literacy (Anderson, Smythe & Shapiro, 2005; Heath, 1983). There appears to be less recognition by schools that individuals and families use literacy in multiple meaningful ways in their everyday lives—ways that are not necessarily identical to school-like literacy practices (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers & Smythe, 2005; Gonzalez et al, 1995; Health, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 2007).

Adults, too, engage in lifelong literacy learning that is influenced by the contexts of their lives. Adult literacy practices are not static; they evolve over time, responding to changing contexts, new needs, and so forth (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Perry, 2007b; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004). Thus, adult language and literacy learning often occurs in response to changing situations or new demands, such as a move to a new country. While some adult learning occurs in contexts of formal schooling, much of it occurs on an informal basis (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). As Barton & Hamilton (1998) found, "When people recalled where they had learned particular aspects of literacy, they talked of learning as adults from friends and relatives in an informal manner, or of learning at work or teaching themselves, or they *just picked it up* [emphasis in the original]" (p. 190). Adult learning, therefore, is a lifelong process that is motivated by and shaped by context.

Television, Literacy & Children

Throughout the course of their daily lives, children typically watch a great deal of television and videos/DVDs (about 2 hours, on average, for children ages 6 and under; Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella, 2003). Even at very young ages, children tune into programs that may influence their

literacy development (e.g., Fisch, 2004) and may connect with their lives outside of the viewing context (e.g., Buckingham, 1993; Marsh, 2005; Robinson, 1997).

Some have argued that the amount of time spent watching television determines how television will impact children and their success in academic areas such as reading. However, others have looked more in-depth at the relationship between television and children's learning and found that content, and not just amount of viewing, makes a difference (Huston & Wright, 1998). Researchers have found that in the short-term and beyond, content helps to determine how television will affect children's outcomes (Anderson et al., 2001; Wright et al., 2001). Evidence shows that watching educational content typically relates to more positive outcomes, such greater gains in academic skills and higher achievement than watching entertainment or violent programming. Specifically related to literacy, certain educational programs—most notably *Sesame Street*, *Barney and Friends*, and *Between the Lions*—have been shown to positively impact specific early literacy skills, including letter recognition (Ball & Bogatz, 1970), vocabulary (Rice, Huston, Truglio, & Wright, 1990), word recognition, letter-sound correspondence and other key early literacy skills (Linebarger, 2000; Linebarger et al., 2004). More ethnographic looks at children's interactions with television and other screen media have also supported the notion that relationships exist between television and children's literacy development and their ideas about literacy (e.g., Dyson, 2003). Although only a few programs have been studied, research suggests that television and other screen media play an important role in children's lives as they develop and learn, particularly in the area of literacy.

Methodology

This study used ethnographic methods to investigate television and literacy practices among three southern Sudanese families. The present analysis is one part of a much larger study of literacy

practices among the families conducted by Perry (Perry, 2007b). The study was designed and data were gathered by Perry, while data analysis was conducted collaboratively by Perry and Moses. Research questions guiding this particular analysis included: (1) What types of programs did the Sudanese children in these families watch?; (2) How did these programs shape the children's literacy practices?; and (3) How do the parents in the Sudanese families view television in the U.S. context, and in relation to language and literacy development?

Participants[2]

To locate appropriate families for the study, Perry 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, Perry 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 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 the researcher to a reasonable degree. All of the participants spoke English, although their levels of fluency varied. Because part of the larger study included children's sense-making around literacy during their first contacts with formal schooling in the U.S., a final criterion 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,

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[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 [Author], 2007a.

Perry selected a kindergartner or first-grader as a focal child. (Viola's family had two children of the appropriate age, and Perry decided to use both as focal children.) In all, four children served as focal participants: 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 three focal families in the study.

In Viola's family[3], both parents were highly educated before coming to the U.S. As the daughter of Sudan's former Minister of Justice, Viola grew up in a privileged home. She attended private schools and earned a scholarship to Ain Shams University in Egypt, where she earned a law degree. Isbon similarly completed high school and some business school in Sudan before leaving that country as a refugee. In this country, however, their education and credentials did not count, and, like most refugees, both worked in low-skilled, low-paying jobs in Michigan. For much of the study, Viola was a homemaker who cared for the family's four boys. She worked part-time in hotel housekeeping, and toward the end of the study, she found a job on a factory line that made automatic door locks for cars. Isbon worked full-time as a janitor at one of the local hospitals, and he sometimes did freelance janitorial work to supplement the family's income. Both parents hoped to further their educations in the U.S. Viola was especially keen to attend law school in Michigan, so that she could continue to practice her profession. She attended courses at the local community college, hoping to improve her English enough to be accepted at the university. Viola and Isbon had four young boys: Boni, Samuel, Medo and Anthony.

In Viola's family, the two oldest sons, Boni and Samuel, served as the focal boys in this study. Boni (short for Boniface) attended first grade, and Samuel was a kindergartner during the

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[3] Because of the system of last names in Sudanese families, families could have from 2-4 last names in one household. To reduce confusion, I refer to the families by the mother's first name.

majority of data collection. Boni was an outgoing, cheerful, energetic little boy who had a keen interest in his African heritage. He enjoyed listening and dancing to music from Africa, and he particularly enjoyed watching the African music videos and soap operas that his parents bought. However, 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, was a quiet, introverted child. He loved to draw, and he often sat with crayons and paper, happily humming to himself and drawing a picture of Superman or some other superhero, while others around him carried on lively conversations. In contrast to Boni, Samuel 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.

The adults in Falabia's family had moderate levels of education, in comparison with other families in the study. Falabia was the daughter of a high-ranking military official, and like Viola, she was able to attend good schools in Sudan. Following high school, she attended nursing school and used her nursing degree to work for an international aid organization that helped malnourished children in Sudan. Falabia's husband, Primo, also completed high school. Following high school, he managed a shop in Khartoum. As with Viola and Isbon, these educational and work experiences did not help Falabia and Primo in the U.S. Both worked as janitors in local hospitals, and both also actively furthered their educations by attending ESL and medical professional classes at the local community college. Both Falabia and Primo became certified as nurse's aides, and Falabia also earned certification in phlebotomy. Falabia and Primo had five children of their own—three girls and two boys—and they also cared for Falabia's niece and nephew, who had been orphaned in the Sudan.

Falabia and Primo's second-to-youngest child, Juana, was the focal child in their family. Juana was an outgoing, social child whom her teacher referred to as "a chatterbox". She identified strongly with the American pop culture she saw on TV shows on the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and the Cartoon Network. She also clearly enjoyed spending time with her siblings and two teenaged cousins, and she liked to accompany them to the public library, where she could use the computers and browse books about popular characters like Hannah Montana. Academically, Juana was about average in her first grade classroom, although her levels of literacy development were behind national norms. One explanation for this was that Juana's teacher was on maternity leave for much of the first half of the school year, and her class had been taught by a succession of substitutes.

In Akhlas' family, the parents had more limited opportunities for formal education in the Sudan. Akhlas completed the seventh grade, but despite the fact that she was consistently at the top of her class, she could go no further because her parents could not afford the expensive school fees. Akhlas' husband, Amin, was able to complete a year or two of high school, but also could go no further. In Michigan, Akhlas worked as a seamstress at Peckham, Inc., a non-profit organization which provided job training and employment for many refugees, ex-convicts, and adults with developmental disabilities. At work, Akhlas was able to attend ESL courses over her lunch hour, and as a result of her easy success with learning the language, she was selected as a peer tutor for other refugees who were learning English. Amin worked part-time as a dishwasher at a local hotel, and he also attended local ESL classes so that he could work toward his GED certificate. During the study, Akhlas and Amin had two children: a girl, Remaz, and a boy, Remon.

Remaz, the focal child from this family, was a bright and friendly child who had a strong affinity for her Sudanese heritage, but like many American girls, she also enjoyed Disney princesses and the color pink. Unlike other children in the study, Remaz preferred PBSKids television

programming to other kid-oriented channels. She avidly watched programs like *Arthur, Buster,* and *Zoom!*, and she eagerly repeated information that she learned from these shows. Academically, Remaz was at the very top of her kindergarten class. She 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 Perry 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.

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. Perry visited each family's home an average of once a week during this period.

Observations and participation occurred in a variety of settings, including family homes, community contexts, and public school classrooms. Field notes were written 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. For the larger study, these observations particularly focused on literacy events. Following Heath (1983), we 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. However, when the researcher visited the families' homes, she also typically documented what was on television as part of the context. Thus, we also used *television events* as one unit of analysis for this study.

Perry also conducted a variety of interviews with participants in the study, including parents and focal children. She tape recorded and transcribed all interviews. Some interviews were open-ended, eliciting information such as general oral histories of participants' lives in Africa or aspects of Sudanese culture. Other interviews were semi-structured, eliciting specific information regarding literacy practices in various contexts.

Finally, Perry 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. She 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 television shaped literacy practices in these families, we analyzed emerging patterns through coding and theme analysis, using the AtlasTi qualitative data analysis software program (AtlasTi Scientific Software, 2007) and various data matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In coding, we first identified each television event represented in the data. For each event, we noted information about the name of the program, the type of programming each event represented (educational/informational or entertainment), the program's intended audience (adults or children), who was watching the program, and whether that person was actively attending to the program or it was on in the background. These codes allowed us to analyze patterns represented in the data. The children in these families also frequently engaged with computer media such as Internet websites or educational software that were related to television programs, and we coded

these media-related literacy events in a similar manner. We noted whether the computer program type was educational or entertainment, the intended audience, and its connection with a television network and program.

We then identified other important themes represented in field note and interview data. For example, significant themes related to literacy appeared, including: TV as a family-wide resource for learning about language and literacy, the connection it provided to Sudanese culture and heritage, and tensions between adults' and children's beliefs that TV could be an important learning tool for children and worries that it might have detrimental effects.

Findings

Television Viewing Across the Sudanese Refugee Families

During the course of [Perry's] time with the families, she observed total of 121 television events. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of what types of programs the Sudanese families generally tended to view and with whom they viewed such programs during these television events. First, participants in this study tended to watch a great deal of entertainment programming (76 total events, or approximately 63% of all television events observed) while only watching some educational/information programs (33 total events, or approximately 27% of the total television events observed). News programs (8 total events, or 6.6% of all television events), religious programs (3 total events, or about 2.5% of all television events), and advertisements (1 total event, or 0.83 of all television events observed) trailed behind (see Figure 2). Second, the Sudanese family members tended to watch programming targeted for their age group: when children viewed programming alone or with other children, they watched mostly child-oriented programs (44 events out of 63 events, or approximately 70% of the events) whereas the adults watched general audience programs when they viewed television alone or with other adults (21 out of 22 events, or

approximately 95% of the events) (see Figure 3). At times, though, these young children were exposed to general-audience programs, particularly when they watched television with an adult (18 events out of 32 events involving adults and children, or 56% of the events), but they also watched this type of programming alone or with another child some of the time (15 out of 63 events, or approximately 24% of events).

Another important factor to consider when thinking about television viewing is how viewers are attending to the screen, that is, whether they have their full attention on the program (foreground television or FTV) or the television is on but no one is really watching (background television or BTV). On occasion, a kind of middle ground appeared in our data which represented an individual alternating his or her attention between viewing and another activity. For example, a child was coloring but would occasionally look up and attend to the television directly for a few minutes, as the vignette at the beginning of this paper illustrates. We labeled these events as intermittent viewing (ITV). Figure 4 shows the type of viewing happening across the events for all of the families. Some of the events entailed foreground exposure to the programs for the children (44 events out of 121 total events, or approximately 36% of events). However, background exposure actually occurred slightly more often for the children (46 events out of 121 total events, or about 38 %). Intermittent viewing happened less often for the young viewers (22 events out of 121 total events, or approximately 18 %) (see Figure 4).

An issue that arises here relates to background and intermittent television viewing, in that this type of exposure to television may affect viewers – particularly young children – in different ways than foreground exposure. Having the television on in the background, and for extended periods of time, may set up a different type of context for developing children than having the television on for foreground exposure and turned off otherwise. In fact, some emerging evidence

suggests that background exposure may disrupt activities such as young children's play (e.g., Anderson & Evans, 2001; Anderson & Pempek, 2005). In contrast, foreground exposure to educationally-oriented programs has been linked to positive outcomes for children.

Television Viewing by Family

Looking across these Sudanese refugee families provides an overview of trends in television viewing events in our data. Another way in which we considered their viewing of television involved looking at the data family by family. The families varied in their general viewing of television, as Figure 5 illustrates. Perry observed Ahklas' family watching the most television (53 of the television events observed, or 43.8%) followed closely behind by Viola's family (48 of the television events obverted, or approximately 40%); Falabia's family watched the least amount of television during the times in which Perry visited the families (20 of the television events, or 16.5%). With regard to the types of programs viewed by each family, Viola's family preferred entertainment programming (38 out of a total 48 events, or 79% of this family's television events) to educational/informational programming (7 out of 48 events, or approximately 14.6% of this family's television events), as did Falabia's family (17 events out of 20 events, or 85% of the events involving entertainment programming vs. 2 out of 20, or 10% of events involving educational/information programming for this family). In contrast, Ahklas' family preferred educational/information programming (24 out of 53 events, or approximately 45% of events), although only somewhat over viewing entertainment programming (21 out of 53 events, or approximately 40%, of television evets for this family). In the following sections, we address how the families' preferences for certain types of programming connected with their literacy learning and experiences. The following sections describe important themes that appeared in observational and interview data regarding television, other media, and language and literacy learning.

TV as a Family-Wide Resource

One clear trend that emerged from the data was that television appeared to be an important family-wide resource in Viola's, Akhlas', and Falabia's families. Like other Americans, the Sudanese families turned to the TV to learn news and information. One of Juana's cousins used the Weather Channel to decide what to wear to school, for example, while Akhlas explained that "sometimes I hear from TV they're having sales". Perry also observed Akhlas regularly watching educational programming on PBS. In February, she viewed a sewing program on that channel, a program she reported frequently watching. Akhlas watched as the women made formal dresses with shimmering, sequined fabrics, and she commented that the sewing machines on the program were much nicer than the one she owned. Although the families used the television in similar ways to other Americans, other important themes also emerged from the data: (1) Television provided the families with a means to maintain connections with their Sudanese culture and heritage, (2) it was a medium for religious expression, and (3) it served as a resource for the families to learn about the U.S. context.

Being able to maintain ties to their Sudanese culture and heritage was important, the parents reported. "We are supposed to keep our tradition," Viola explained. To do so, the families sometimes wore traditional Sudanese clothing, and "we try to let our kids know Sudanese food," Viola explained. In addition, the parents spoke Arabic with their children and some also planned to teach them to read and write in that language. Watching African television programming was another way in which the families appeared to maintain these cultural ties. When Perry visited the families' homes, she frequently observed them watching DVDs of music videos or soap-opera style dramas from Africa. One time, Isbon explained that much of the music came from "Zaire" (Democratic Republic of Congo), and that Zairean DVDs were the most popular ones in Africa.

Sudanese people, he explained, use Zairean "cassettes" for music at parties, and he claimed that people in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania did so as well. Isbon frequently watched these African music videos, and his boys also enjoyed them immensely. Sometimes, these videos were brought out when Sudanese families gathered together for social purposes. In November, for example, Akhlas' family visited Falabia's family. Akhlas was known for her abilities to style women's hair and to draw intricate tattoo designs with henna; she had come over so that the women and girls could all have their hair done. She had brought some DVDs of a popular television program from Nigeria with her, which played in the background while the women chatted and styled each others' hair. Thus, these music videos and television programs from various African countries appeared to provide a connection to the families' cultural heritage.

Television also acted as a family resource in that it provided a medium for religious expression. This theme was particularly strong in Akhlas' family; all of the families in this study were deeply Christian, but Akhlas especially seemed to use the TV as a religious resource. She often watched programs on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, a religious channel. In October, for example, she tuned in to a program that described Christians around the world and showed people praying in many different languages. Akhlas watched the program intently. The minister on the program offered a prayer for people around the world; Akhlas closed her eyes and listened to this, murmuring "mmm" and "yes" at different points in the prayer. Thus, for Akhlas, watching this program was not just an opportunity to learn about Christians, it was an opportunity for her to actively pray and to participate *with* that community. However, Akhlas also clearly believed that the programming on this station provided important learning opportunities, particularly for her children. Another day, Remaz wanted to switch the channel from the Trinity Broadcasting Network, saying,

"I want to watch PBSKids." Her mother replied, "No, you must listen [to] this one—it's better." She added that Remaz needed to learn something from this program.

Finally, television also appeared to provide a resource for the families to learn about the U.S. context, particularly as they watched the news and other informational or educational programming. Television provided one means by which the refugees could learn about U.S. history or historical figures and also current events. When Coretta Scott King passed away, for example, Isbon and Viola watched her funeral on TV. Similarly, Viola reported that she had watched a program on African-American heritage on PBS, in which various famous African-Americans had undergone genetic testing to trace their "roots", as Viola said. She talked about Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg and said that the program was very interesting. Naturally, the television also helped the families learn about U.S. pop culture, as well: When a program showed a segment on Hollywood, Remaz announced, "You know, Hollywood is where you sing." Finally, television also showed the families that the U.S. may not be so different after all—when Viola and Isbon watched an episode of "Dr. Phil", Viola chuckled and commented that people in her country had the same problems.

Television and Adult Language Learning

One interesting finding from this study was the ways in which the adults in these families used television as a resource for learning about the English language. The parents often commented that they found the TV to be a useful way to improve their English skills. As Falabia explained, "I learned how to spell English on channel 18, the learning channel." She added, "They spell everything out…and they tell the meaning." She explained that she had watched ESL programming on this channel, and that it had helped her when she began taking ESL courses at the local community college.

Akhlas, too, talked about learning English on TV, although her preferred medium for this

was children's programming, rather than educational programming for adults. "I like to watch the kids' TV, the cartoons," she explained in February. "It's good because I learn a lot of words." In April, Akhlas reiterated how helpful (and entertaining) she found cartoons: "I hear the words, and they make me happy!" She added that they were easy to understand, so that whenever her children watched these programs, she liked to come out and watch them, too. Although Akhlas expressed a preference for children's programming, Perry also observed her using other types of programs as a resource to practice English, particularly her English literacy skills. In October, for example, Akhlas turned the TV to C-SPAN, the government channel, which was featuring a story about Samuel Alito's nomination to the Supreme Court. The caption of the bottom of the screen said, "Capital News", which Akhlas slowly read aloud. She continued to read all of the captions aloud as they changed, mostly under her breath. Thus, television provided the Sudanese parents with a variety of opportunities to improve their oral and written English skills. Some programs were designed specifically to teach ESL skills, such as the ones Falabia viewed on Channel 18. Other times, however, the parents used what was available—children's cartoons, news programs—to learn and practice new skills.

Children, Television and Literacy Practices

The parents in this study clearly believed that television was a resource that they, and their children, could use for learning. In fact, Akhlas emphasized television's learning and teaching potential with her children. When her young son, Remon, came into the kitchen and announced that "it's finished, *Arthur* is finished," Akhlas asked him, "Okay, what did you learn? [On] *Arthur*, what happened? Are you learning something?" When Remon replied in the affirmative, Akhlas quizzed him again, "What are you learning?" However, the parents also recognized that not all television programming was educational. Viola, for example, sometimes borrowed children's videos from the

public library, and she wanted to ensure that what she was borrowing would have some educational benefit for her children. During one of Perry's visits, Viola pointed to a *Scooby-Doo* DVD and asked, "Is it educational?" Perry explained that while the movie was intended for children, it was mostly just for fun and was not really educational. Viola commented that the library had many "cassettes" for children, but she did not know how to determine which ones were educational, where her children could learn something while they were watching. Thus, the Sudanese parents in this study clearly believed that television programming could be an educational resource for their children, but they sometimes had difficulty discerning which programs might have the most (if any) learning potential.

This difficulty also points to a tension the parents experienced: On the one hand, they believed that television offered educational opportunities. On the other hand, like many American parents, they often worried that their children spent too much time in front of the television and that this could be problematic for them. Researchers have found similar feelings among a national sampling of parents in the U.S.; some had concerns about television's influence on their children's learning (31%), some felt it could foster learning (38%), and some reported that they did not feel it influenced their children's learning at all (22%) (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Parents likely feel the tug between the potential positive and potential negative effects that they hear about in the media and others around them. Falabia, for example, explained that her boys used to have a television in their bedroom, but that Primo had taken it away from them. "They don't want to study and do homework," she explained, because the TV had a video player in it; the boys would stay up late and watch TV at night instead of going to sleep. Viola, too, worried that too much television might be detrimental for her sons. In June, she reported that she had not been reading with the boys much, and that they had just been watching TV in the mornings instead. She shook her head ruefully. The

following week, she commented that she wanted to sign her boys up for day camp at the local

community center, because all they were doing was sitting around and watching cartoons, and she

did not want them to do that. However, like many American parents, Viola, Akhlas, and Falabia also

found that the television could be a useful babysitter when they needed to accomplish things. Viola

often placed baby Anthony in front of the TV, and he particularly liked watching an old Disney

Chip and Dale animated movie the family owned. "We call this Anthony's wife," Viola said,

laughing as she indicated him watching the movie.

Interestingly, the children's beliefs about television viewing echoed the beliefs of their

parents. The children expressed the same tension—that television could be both a resource and a

problem. Once, when Remaz announced, "I like to watch TV—too much!", Perry asked her if she

thought it was good to watch TV. "Mmm-hmm," Remaz replied, "'cause it helps you learn, for little

kids." Thus, like Akhlas, Remaz recognized television's learning potential. However, the children

also apparently understood the other side of this tension, that television viewing could be

problematic for children. Boni, for example, pulled out a DVD of the movie *Shaft* and explained that

he couldn't watch it because "they cuss." When Perry asked Samuel if he thought it was good for

children to watch TV, he replied, "Uh, yeah…but you don't have to[4] watch Jackie Chan. Kids don't

watch Jackie Chan." He went on to explain that "they were fight people" and "kids will know to

fight." The children, thus, seemed to be aware of debates about whether or not children should

watch television, particularly certain types of programming.

What Children Gain from TV

Although the children had an awareness of this tension and these debates, the reality is that

they watched television—sometimes a great deal of it. As we noted, the television was almost

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[4] Samuel's family typically used the phrase "don't have to" to mean that something was not permitted. Thus, when Samuel says "you don't have to watch Jackie Chan," he means that children are not allowed to do so.

always on in these families' homes. Thus, the question becomes, "*What* were the children gaining from watching TV?" Our data show that television viewing provided these children with access to important content knowledge, just as it had for their parents and families. This was particularly apparent with Remaz, who most often watched educational programming on PBSKids, and who also was exposed to news and other informational shows intended for adults. During the fall, when hurricanes Katrina and Rita were devastating the gulf coast, Remaz noticed the news about one hurricane on TV. "Ooh, a hairy cane!" she exclaimed, and commented that she had learned that a "hairy cane" (or "hairy king"—she used the terms interchangeably) was "a big weather" and "it can kill people." Another time, she expounded on the virtues of border collies, their intelligence, and their uses as herding dogs, which she said she had learned about on PBSKids. When Perry helped Remaz with her kindergarten homework in late February, she asked Remaz if she knew about the "magic E" on the end of some words that helps the vowel say its name. Remaz replied, "I heard about the magic E on TV." She added, "He took the policeman's hat and made it into a thing that can fly"—that is, he had turned his *cap* into a *cape.* Thus, Remaz's exposure to children's educational programming and to news programs intended for adults had provided her with a great deal of content knowledge. She had learned about hurricanes and weather, about dogs, and about an English spelling rule, among others.

Favorite programs and videos also appeared to provide the children with the motivation to read and otherwise engage with media-related print. Jordan (2005) also noted the connection between children's book reading and the television programs and DVDs they watched. Perry frequently observed the focal children as they attempted to read print on DVD covers or on television-related computer games—text that was often above the children's current reading levels. Boni, for example, loved the African music videos that his family owned. One day, he brought out a

new DVD that his father had bought. Boni picked up the DVD case, explained that the name of it was *Extra Musica*, and pointed to the title. He ran his finger below the first word, saying "Extra." He pointed to the M, said "mus" and then "CA!" when he reached the last two letters. Boni, who avoided reading in school as much as possible, was more than happy to try to read these words, which clearly held much meaning for him. Later in the year, Boni again brought out several of the family's DVDs. He showed Perry the *Chip & Dale* movie, pointing to each word as he said the name of the chipmunks. He pointed to *Shaft* (the movie he could not watch because "they cuss"), which stars Samuel L. Jackson. Boni pointed to the actor's name and said, "His name right here— Samuel! Samuel Shift!" He then switched the name around: "Samuel Shift. Shift Samuel, Shift Samuel." Late in the study, Perry visited Boni's family during the World Cup soccer tournament. Like his father, Boni was a huge soccer fan, and he tuned the TV to a Spanish-language channel that was showing a match between Germany and Sweden. Boni looked at the scoreboard on the screen and asked which countries were playing. Perry showed him that the first team, GER, was Germany, and the second one, SWE, was Sweden. Boni read the scoreboard and said, "Oh! So, Germany has 2 points!" He added that Sweden had zero points, and he continued to watch the game and track the team's scores. Thus, Boni once again demonstrated his willingness to try to read when the print was related to movies or programs that caught his interest.

Juana, too, was a somewhat reluctant reader when it came to school literacy tasks. But when it came to reading print related to her favorite programs, like Boni, she was more than happy to try to read. Unlike Boni, Juana often had opportunities to use computers and to play online games. Like her older brothers, Juana preferred to play games related to the shows she watched on TV. One day, she was navigating the Cartoon Network's website, which offered some free activities and others that required users to pay. Juana attempted to understand what was a free game and what was not.

While she looked over the page, she pointed at dollar signs and said, "This isn't a game because it got this." Juana's brothers also had taught her that different keys on the keyboard performed different actions, and these could change from game to game. Juana quickly learned that she needed to consult the rules for each game to learn which keys to press. In February, for example, she opened up a window with the rules and, although she could not read the extended text, she located the part that explained which keys to use. "Okay," she said, "Z and X." She pointed to the arrow keys on the screen and the ones on the keyboard and added, "Those and those." Like Boni, Juana was willing to work hard to make sense of this text, which was associated with a favorite show.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this study is the fact that the children's television viewing appeared to influence their literacy practices. That is, what the children saw on TV later shaped what books they chose to read and what computer programs they chose to use. The vignette at the beginning of this manuscript is an excellent example of this phenomenon. The children often drew connections between books and programs, particularly those programs on PBS that featured children's books or were connected with book series, like *Clifford* or *Arthur.* Boni, for example, once related the plot of an *Arthur* story to his mother. When Perry asked if Boni had seen this on TV, Viola responded, "Yeah, PBSKids." Boni, however, disagreed and said that he had seen it in a book at school. Similarly, Juana loved the book *Bunny Cakes* (Wells, 2000), which she had received as a Christmas gift. One day in January, she asked Perry to read the book to her, and she commented that she had seen the same *Bunny Cakes* story on TV that day.

Juana, unlike the children from other families, visited the public library on a fairly regular basis. The library owned many books that were related to popular characters and children's television programs on both public and commercial stations, such as *Arthur, Dora the Explorer,* and *Hannah Montana.* Other books related to popular celebrities, like Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.

Juana gravitated to these books at the library. Regarding a book about Barbie, she said, "I love these kinds of books!" In March, for example, Juana selected books related to the Disney shows *Lizzie McGuire* and *Kim Possible.* As she looked through the *Lizzie McGuire* book and pointed out various pictures, she explained, "I like Lizzie McGuire. This is all the shows that we watch." And, as we have already described, Juana loved to play computer games related to these same shows. Thus, Juana's reading preferences were clearly connected with the television programming that she watched on a daily basis.

In addition to reading, television also appeared to shape these children's writing practices. Dyson (1993, 2003) has documented the myriad ways in which young children draw from popular culture as they learn to write. The Sudanese children in this study were no different—they, too, used television programs and popular characters as resources when they wanted to write. Juana, who generally avoided writing at school, opened up a notebook at home one afternoon and announced, "I'm gonna write about Care Bears." Like the children in Dyson's studies, Samuel also used superheroes in his writing. These superheroes, however, did not appear in Samuel's schoolwork, but only in his writing at home. One day, for example, he drew a picture of a dragon and several superheroes. He said, "I'm gonna write Batman [pronounced "bad man"] because that dragon was bad." He drew a picture of Batman in red with wings in the lower corner of the page. Then, he said he was going to make Spiderman: "I want to write Spiderman. I want to write a story."

Although we noted that most of these television-text connections occurred outside of school, at home and in community settings such as the library, we did find that the children occasionally made these connections at school, as well. Perry observed Boni's class one morning as they visited the school's computer lab. When Boni heard the teacher say that one of the permitted sites they could visit was PBSKids.org, Boni immediately chose that site above the other available options.

Boni looked at the list of programs on the website until he reached a link for the show *Zoom!*, a show that Boni recognized. "*Zoom!*" He said, "I like *Zoom!*"

Thus, these themes illustrate the important role that television held as a language and literacy resource for the Sudanese families in these studies. Television was a learning resource for both adults and children, and it also offered ways in which the families could connect to their Sudanese heritage, learn about U.S. cultures and contexts, and participate in spiritual life.

Implications

In coming to the United States, refugee families experience a great deal of change. Speaking English and understanding the various literacies involved in daily life is the U.S. is a constant and consistent challenge. Although the Sudanese families highlighted in this study differed in their education and language and literacy levels, each family shared in the desire to learn and to thrive in their new environments. They relied on their own resourcefulness to accomplish tasks, adjust to new routines, and maintain a sense of family, a sense of self, and their heritage. Television represented one resource for these families that provided the opportunities: (a) to learn about U.S. society while also maintaining connections to their African heritage, and (b) to learn languages and literacies. It also represented a resource for families as they engaged in other literacy practices, as they used information learned from television to engage in activities and with other media outside of the television viewing context.

The contexts in which children grow are critical for what and how they learn, and for their learning and experience with literacies, many different influences surround them. As they develop, children learn about the functions and purposes of different literacies from the people and the materials, or tools, around them. The results of this study demonstrate that television is one tool that can play a significant part in children's daily lives and their learning. It also has an important place

in the lives of all family members. Adult learning, too, is shaped by context. And when contexts change, as they did for the Sudanese adults in this study, a great deal of learning must take place. The adults in this study needed to learn a new language (English), and although they were already literate in Arabic, they needed to learn to read and write using the Roman alphabet. They also needed to learn a new cultural context, including beliefs, values, attitudes, expectations, and behavioral norms. Television provided an important resource for this learning. One important implication of this finding is that, rather than detracting from children's (and adults') learning, television actually enhanced their learning.

Although television may seem to mainstream Americans as an "old" technology, television signifies a new technology to these Sudanese families, since they had limited access to television sets and extensive programming (i.e., cable) prior to their move to Michigan. In addition, television was often one of the only media to which they had access on a regular basis. Participants in this study quickly learned what information television could offer and how to navigate the kind of programming available. Adults and children gravitated toward programming created particularly for their own age groups, and they found useful information in these shows as well as found some enjoyment in watching them. From learning new English words and orthography to pop culture and historical information, Ahklas', Falabia's and Viola's families learned from television programs and videos and, in turn, used that information to accomplish tasks (even if just for enjoyment purposes) that were important to them. Thus, television comprised one of the "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) that children and adults could draw upon as they learned new language and literacy skills and practices.

Apart from learning from adults, the Sudanese children in this study also learned from watching television and videos more directly, as Remaz demonstrated with her knowledge about

border collies and the "magic E". In addition, television linked up with children's choices with other media. Although research regarding this connection is scant, findings from this study point to potentially significant implications. If children's choices in books, websites, or computer games depend in part on their interest in and viewing of certain television programs, then it provides an interesting and potentially critical link to understanding children's learning from these various media. One implication of this finding relates to children's in-school learning: teachers may want to consider ways of recognizing and incorporating what children learn from television and other media into their classrooms. While print materials related to television programs are not necessarily high-quality or valued as literature, similar to comic books and other popular culture reading materials, they may provide greater motivation for some children to engage with print than other materials. Teachers also may consider integrating educationally-oriented television clips and DVDs into children's activities, when the programs' content helps achieve a specific curricular goal (i.e., not just showing a clip to as a time-filler but using content that supports and extends what children are learning). With respect to educational settings both for adults and children, educators can become acquainted with the families' media use, and they can use the knowledge that families learn from television and other media to teach new material or ideas. Educators may also consider supplementing curricular materials with educational or informational television programs in their educational setting, as it may present material in an accessible way to refugee parents and/or children.

As researchers continue to investigate children's and adults' development of literacies, they should consider the role of television and other media. Particularly for work with refugee families, researchers should take into account individuals' and families' interactions with media and how

various media – old and new – influence development and learning in general and specifically related to language and literacies.

Finally, individuals and organizations who work with refugee families should consider how television may help them navigate the wide variety of experiences and contexts that lie ahead for them. Few refugee families can afford computers and Internet access, as the families in this study demonstrate. And, while refugees from some countries may have experience with digital technologies in their home countries, few who come from Sudan or other similar situations have had exposure to digital media before coming to the U.S. Thus, television, videos and DVDs, rather than the Internet, are likely the most relevant "new media" for many refugee families. Access to television, at a basic level, is relatively inexpensive (particularly in comparison to other media products and technologies), and one that refugee families typically have in their home already. Those working with refugee families could provide guidance on quality programming for all ages as well as how to make the most of the content that is presented on television. Current perspectives tend to paint television as a detriment to children's learning, but educators must recognize that television has the potential to be a very powerful source of learning and information, of knowledge about the English language and about the U.S. context, that can—and should—be utilized to help refugee children and adults succeed in this country.

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Table 1

Focal Families

Educational Background	Parents' Names	Highest Educational Degree Attained	Occupation in U.S.	Focal Child(ren)	Focal Child's Grade Level
High level of education	Mother: Viola Lupai	Law Degree	Factory line worker	Boni Domoulouka	1st
	Father: Isbon Domoulouka	Some College	Hospital janitor	Samuel Domoulouka	Kindergarten
Middle level of education	Mother: Falabia Edward	Nursing Degree	Hospital janitor	Juana Gildo	1st
	Father: Primo Lukuat	High School	Hospital janitor		
Low level of education	Mother: Akhlas Kago	7th Grade	Seamstress	Remaz Abdelhrman	Kindergarten
	Father: Amin Abdelhrman	Some High School	Hotel dishwasher		

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Remaz's drawing of Arthur.

Figure 2. Total number of television events across families by type of program viewed.

Figure 3. Total number of television events across families involving who is watching a given program versus who the intended audience is for that program

Figure 4. Total number of television events across families as a function of the type of viewing behavior.

Figure 5. Total number of television events by family.

Figure 6. Total number of television events by type of program viewed by each family.

Type of Viewing