"Helping Our People": The role of literacies in mediating community among Sudanese refugees

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Who are the Sudanese in Michigan?

- Refugees from southern Sudan (~1,000)
- "Lost Boys" = orphaned youth, mostly boys (~200)
- Languages spoken among the Lost Boys:
  - Dinka/other local language
  - English
  - Kiswahili
  - Arabic

Historical Context

- Civil war in Sudan: 1983-present
- Journey of the Lost Boys
- Kakuma: Education in the refugee camp
  - Free schools organized by UNHCR
  - Languages: English & KiSwahili

Theoretical Framework

- Literacy as social practice
  (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2001; Luke, 2003)
  - Literacies are multiple
  - Associated with life domains
  - Associated with power
  - Purposeful, embedded in social relationships
  - Historically situated, dynamic and changing

Research Questions

- What does literacy mean to Sudanese refugees in Michigan?
- Which life domains contextualize literacy practices for Sudanese refugees?
- How do school literacies align with those used in the wider Sudanese community?
- What is the role of *community* in the literacy practices of these Lost Boys?

Methodology

- DATA COLLECTION:
- Participant observation
- Semi-structured interviews
  - 3 focal participants
- Artifact collection

- ANALYSIS:
- Coding of textual practices by:
  - Sociotextual domain, including genre/purpose of text
  - Language used
- Creation of data matrices to organize emerging themes
- Triangulation across data sources
- Participant checks

Role of the Researcher

- Tutor/mentor
- Community board member
- Recruitment of participants
  - In-home tutoring
  - Community events

Finding:
Literacy practices linked to community

- 5 Key Sociotextual Domains
- Religion
- Interpersonal communication
- Community information/news
- Community organization
- School

Finding:
Link between school and community

- "Education is our mother and our father"
  —Lost Boys proverb
- Overcoming orphanhood
- Duty to the Sudan and those left behind
- African models of education
  - Community nature of schools in Kakuma
  - Traditional storytelling

Finding:
School/community literacies differ

- School/community purposes and uses of literacy clearly differed
  - US focus: certification and credentialing
  - Lost Boys' focus: community-building and preservation of identity/culture

Discussion:
Creating community for orphans

- "We are a community-oriented people"—Ezra
- Literacy, education, & community transact with and co-construct each other
- Community becomes textually mediated when it is no longer spatially mediated

Discussion:
Implications for education

- Literacy practices are closely tied with issues of identity and community
- Aligning school literacy practices with authentic community purposes for literacy is important
  - May make literacy instruction more meaningful & relevant to everyday lives
  - May provide powerful motivation to engage in school literacy practices