Sharing stories, linking lives: A case study of literacy practices 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
  - English
  - Dinka & other local languages
  - Arabic

Research Questions

- Which life domains contextualize literacy practices for Sudanese refugees?
- How are different languages used across and within these domains?

Case Methodology

- Participant observation
- Semi-structured interviews
- Artifacts
- Triangulation
- Participant checks

Role of the researcher

- Tutor
- Community mentor
- Recruitment of participants
  - In-home tutoring
  - Community events

Key domains exist for literacy practices

- School
- Religion
- Interpersonal communication
- Community information/news
- Community organization
  - These domains are key for Sudanese in *both* the US and African contexts
  - Literacy practices tend to have a community focus

Importance of English

- Print literacy closely tied to English
  - Most texts in Africa exist in English
  - Low levels of local language literacy
- Sudanese refugees prefer English
  - Arabic carries a stigma
  - English as a *lingua franca*
  - Many Sudanese refugees are literate only in English

Need for literacy in local languages

- For resistance to northern Sudanese domination
- For preservation of Sudanese culture and identity
  - Connection between language and culture
  - Orphaned generation

In-school and out-of-school literacies do not really match

- School literacy focuses on certification and credentials
- Out-of-school literacies have a community focus
  - School: textbooks, worksheets, essays
  - Community: email, letters, the Bible, editorial columns, discussion boards

Issues to consider:

- It may be equally important to develop both local language and English literacies for the Sudanese refugees
- Community and identity appear to be powerful motivators for literacy practices among these refugees
  - Importance of storytelling

Issues to consider:

- Schools may want to consider community purposes for literacy in developing literacy curriculum
  - e.g. religion, community organization, interpersonal communication, telling experiences