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Living “Glocally” With Literacy Success in the Midwest

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of glocality as a way to better understand why immigrants, poor people, print-illiterate families, and boys are short-changed by schools that often operate under a deficit model or deprivation model in which students' economic, language, and gender status is the main determinant for school success. The author offers for discussion a set of themes that address (a) the challenges of recent immigration and resettlement in the Midwestern region of the United States, (b) the concept of glocality in connection to youth literacies and transnationalism, (c) the Midwest as a glocal context, and (d) the implications of success in relation to teachers and schools. Examples of glocality are drawn from research on Middle Eastern youth immigrant and refugee populations from Yemen and Iraq, as well as low socioeconomic American youth.

The research of K-12 literacy and language scholars (Auerbach, 1989, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lank-shear, 2002) suggests that immigrants, poor people, print-illiterate families, and boys are short-changed by schools that often operate under a deficit model or deprivation model (Varrenne & McDermott, 1998) in which students' economic, language, and gender status is the main determinant for school success. Youth are growing up in social and cultural worlds where literacy looks quite different from what is privileged in schools. Ideally, all high school students should be able to read and comprehend a variety of genres at the high school level, but in many states, including those in the Midwest, schools are finding that growing numbers of students who are not designated as special education students often do not pass graduation reading exams on the first try, and school districts have begun to draw on research in reading achievement at the elementary levels to address this situation.

Recent immigration from all parts of the world is a relatively new phenomenon in the Midwest, and immigrants and refugees, as well as their hosts, are faced with new challenges to

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their values, norms, and sense of what it means to be a literate person fully participating in all social spheres. At the same time, middle- and high-school teachers find themselves in a rapidly changing demographic situation and must learn to become teachers of literacy. Thus, reading in the United States and elsewhere has been politicized to such an extent in intellectual and policy circles at local, state, and national levels, and in popular media that it has become difficult to reconcile ideological perspectives, scientific stances, and best practices (Gee, 2000; Snow, 2000). Moreover, youth and their families remain in the center of these debates about effective literacy instruction and are active agents of their reading or literacy practices. It is important to understand more broadly how researchers, teachers, policy makers, and families approach literacy; how they implement policies and strategies in and out of schools that create and develop readers among American, immigrant, and refugee youth; and how these practices lead to success and self-sufficiency, two seemingly American goals.

To address the dilemmas mentioned in this introduction, I offer for discussion a set of themes that address (a) the challenges of recent immigration and resettlement, (b) the concept of *glocality* in connection to youth literacies and transnationalism, (c) the Midwest as a glocal context, and (d) the implications of success in relation to teachers and schools. I end with some ideas for how educators and researchers might conceptualize literacy in a glocal world.

Challenges of Recent Immigration and Resettlement

In her analysis of the impact of immigration on Lincoln, Nebraska, Pipher (2002) noted that Lincoln includes children from over 50 nationalities. What is more unusual is the fact that the immigrants to Lincoln from predominantly Muslim countries arrived in the city not voluntarily, but at the behest of the U.S. government. We know little about their education in their home countries, or of their experience of assim-

ilation and concomitant language and literacy learning in English and their native language(s). Pipher's book is the first popular audience book to delve into the lives of people who are not immigrants in the normative sense of the word, but who have been chosen by the U.S. government to apply and seek refugee status here. The refugees, some 20,000 a year prior to 9/11, are not given a choice about where they live. Instead, they are brought to refugee-designated sites, such as communities in Nebraska, North Dakota, Virginia - states with relatively stable economies and low unemployment rates - and are expected to make new lives for themselves. However, anthropologists remind us that

resettlement is a complex process that underscores (1) the means of ensuring that there are opportunities for restoring and improving living standards of the resettled population, (2) the importance of having conflict resolution mechanisms to reduce the possibility of host-resettler conflicts, and (3) the need to ensure that both resettlers and hosts are beneficiaries of the resettlement and development process. (Willis & Hitchcock, 2002, p. 1)

United States citizens and refugees from other nations must somehow understand each other, their mutual interactions, and relevant institutions of host cities. The experiences of refugees in sites like Lincoln, Nebraska, are different from those of immigrants who have traditionally chosen where they will live. And, although immigrants were frequently faced with limited options for resettlement in the past (or even in the present) because they had to relocate according to employment opportunities, that image of the independent immigrant is, itself, a distortion of the kind and degree of choice that many immigrants of the last two centuries actually had. There is no doubt that the refugee experiences studied by Pipher (2002) pointed out that (a) identity is no longer based on [a national] territory, and that (b) one of the greatest challenges in the United States is to understand how people from different countries, religions, and traditions view Americans. Their view is important because the

glocalization of space and interaction by host, immigrant, and refugee populations requires common understandings of success in everyday life.

Living ‘Glocally’: Literacy and Transnationalism

How do individuals successfully negotiate their lives locally as they interact with the world globally? The concept *glocal*, which has been used by scholars to describe economic phenomena that are simultaneously universal and particular, helps frame the local and global connections that people make as they learn to live in a new setting as they adapt and adopt new literacies. Foremost among the scholars who study such phenomena is Robertson (1995), who laid a foundation for the study of modernity requiring the understanding of an increasing global discourse about locality, community, and home. This interconnectedness, as Robertson noted, is so pervasive that even the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* includes a definition of *glocal*, a term originally used in Japan to signify the adaptation of farming techniques to local conditions and also to explain Japanese business: “the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near-global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets” (Robertson, p. 28). What is important about the concept *glocal* is that it offers a view of everyday life that does not dichotomize local and global particularities or imply a binarism of good and bad. Glocalization thus describes how people relate linguistically, culturally, and cognitively to one another and to the institutions they inhabit in times of change. This is particularly salient in the Midwest, where home is both in Nebraska and other countries such as Iraq, Bosnia, Mexico, Vietnam, Dearborn, the Ukraine, or Russia. The same can be said about southeastern Michigan, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Poland, Russia, etc.

For scholars of literacy, *glocal* is especially helpful, because literacy is tied to both academic and social success, linking literacy practices to the homelands of refugees and immigrants and the United States. Literacy is an important di-

mension of youths’ lives in and out of school. Literacy and reading, for the purposes of this argument, are not defined in traditional terms as stemming from either sociocultural or cognitive and psychological traditions. Those dichotomous relationships are relinquished for a more middle ground approach (Pearson, 1996) that suggests that literacy and reading are what key agents (parents, youth, teachers, and policy makers) make them to be in public schools, homes, work places, and communities. Definitions of literacy depend, in large part, on the socialization of individuals’ identities in different contexts and places and on scholarly research mediated by political agendas. Thus, to uncover what a *reader* is, or how one becomes literate and how s/he connects this perception to academic and social success, means to understand the relationship of the reader to himself or herself, and to those who broker (Pipher, 2002) or sponsor (Brandt, 2001) their relationships with social institutions and local, national, and global economies. These relationships allow for the careful documentation of the multiple layers of identity building and socialization that both refugee and American youth negotiate in a transnational setting such as the Midwest.

According to the *Concise Oxford American Dictionary* (2006), transnationalism means “extending or operating across national boundaries” (p. 968). In other words, folk and personal theories of success are as important in the extension and operation of individual and communal identities within local and international boundaries as they might be in promoting socioeconomic mobility, a broader and more general goal shared by many people regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or color. Therefore, as Heath (1983) and Heath and McLaughlin (1993) noted in their work, examining and defining the intersection of home and school expectations for literate success is one way of categorically establishing the relationships that govern dispositions, language use, social adjustment, and self-actualization. In turn, school is negotiated through the glocal experiences that refugees and immigrants live out from day to day.

The Midwest as Glocal Context

Within the past decade, several regions in the Midwest have received new linguistic, ethnic, and religious populations. As such, identity, or the glocalization of identity, seems to be at the forefront of intellectual and policy debates as schools struggle to accommodate a range of student abilities, dispositions, ethnicities, sociocultural and economic backgrounds, and so on. McCarthey and Moje (2002) suggested that youth create hybrid identities as a means to successfully negotiate their youth cultures and school norms. Alvermann's (2001, 2002) analysis was connected to this notion of hybridity, when she recommends that teachers find ways to encourage the use of multiple literacies in their classrooms, including those that youth privilege, such as digital literacies, in order to connect to adolescents' out-of-school lives. Hull (2001) argued that there is very little connection between literacy (in this case defined as reading and writing) and the work of low-wage workers, and that literacy has been historically used to discriminate against certain groups of people, such as African Americans, poor Whites, Hispanics and Latinos, and women.

Since 2002, I have been following a group of 16 high school Middle Eastern and American youth in and out of school. I have documented how the students negotiate and learn various literacies, and how their teachers enact literacy in high school for both ELL and mainstream students. One key finding is that these secondary literacy classrooms are composed of mostly low-socioeconomic status (SES) students, who are on free and reduced lunch, and the number of such classes is growing. For example, since 2001, the number of reading classes in the focal high school has more than doubled, and the same can be said about the other high schools that serve predominantly low-SES populations. In 2005, the focal high school offered five types of reading classes, ranging from a beginning reading class that served emerging readers, to the most advanced level, offered as an option to students whose reading score on the district graduation exam was within one stan-

dard deviation of passing. If students earn a C+ in the most advanced class, they can pass the exam and fulfill their high school requirement. There were 10 to 12 of each of the intermediate level reading classes that served from 6 to 19 students each. As one teacher pointed out, 40% of the students in the school were part of the free/reduced lunch program, but they comprised 97% of the reading classes. This is disproportional and invites continued study to answer why poor white kids, African Americans, Latinos and Hispanics, immigrants and refugees, and minorities in general find themselves in these remedial classes as they make the transition from elementary school to middle school, and then to high school. Why is it a cultural fact that these populations of students are in high school literacy classes when there is evidence that these youth read a variety of texts on their own and are engaged with an array of print activities on a daily basis (Sarroub, 2007; Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007; Sarroub & Rub, 2006)? This is an area that is ripe for further study and analysis.

Furthermore, within this school setting are refugees from Iraq who must also actively engage with a curriculum aimed to address the deficits in their host society (see McBrien, 2005, for a review of literature regarding refugees), thus lumping together what appear to be, in the literature, peoples living on the margins of society. These new American high school literacy classrooms have become a microcosm of transnational identities, reflecting political and educational tensions that span across continents. The recent refugees from Iraq, some three to five thousand people in Nebraska alone, represent different religious (Sunni, Shi'a, Yezidi, Wahabe) and ethnic (Kurd and Arab) groups. They also represent varied socioeconomic populations in their homeland, ranging from well-educated professionals to subsistence farmers. They arrived in the United States after the First and Second Gulf Wars with a range of educational experiences, many of them with little formal schooling because of the deplorable conditions of some resettlement camps such as the Rafha camp in Saudi Arabia. In addition, some

refugees such as the Kurd Yezidis - whose religious beliefs advocate avoiding literacy (reading and writing) - face problematic cultural transitions within high school ESL and literacy classes (Sarroub, 2007). Other factors, such as the geopolitical tensions between the Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, play out in classrooms, in cafeterias, and in town, dividing student populations. Teachers must deal with these cultural and religious tensions as they attempt to teach reading in high school classrooms.

Complicating Success: Implications for Teachers and Schools

The idea of success becomes all the more complex when it is woven into the glocal fabric created out of the threads of cultural, religious, linguistics, geographical, national, and personal forces (Sarroub, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Varrenne & McDermott, 1998). It is especially critical given that, by 2020, one in every five students will be an immigrant or the child of immigrants (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Literacy success in secondary schools is also intimately tied to the sociocultural and socioeconomic identities that students, teachers, and parents have a hand in creating and enacting (such as being a good reader). Today, researchers examine youth literacy practices that show that students are, in fact, reading and writing, even as they fail reading exams (Sarroub & Rub, 2006). My research shows that students in these classes actively resist these exams, often not taking them or treating them as having little consequence in their lives, when, in fact, they are used to determine students’ academic trajectories. There is a need to foster conversation and connection between school-based literacy and youths’ literacy practices outside of school.

Research on effective schools, conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, focused on elementary schools, and recently there has been more research conducted on effective schools at the secondary levels. Hoffman (1991) listed the attributes of effective schools as (a) a clear school mission; (b) effective leadership and practices; (c) high expectations; (d) a safe, orderly, and positive environment; (e) ongoing

curriculum improvement; (f) maximum use of instructional time; (g) frequent monitoring of student progress; and (h) positive home-school relationships (cited in Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2002, p. 6). These characteristics encompass a range, both in depth and breadth, of the ways that schools do the work of being effective and, although they are helpful in describing schools, they do not account for the ways in which students, teachers, parents, and communities make sense of school life outside of school. They especially do not account for the ways in which youth resist school literacies as they navigate their glocal identities in and out of school. Moll and his colleagues (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992; Moll & Gonzales, 1994) suggested that teachers have useful and important resources in their students’ communities, which they call funds of knowledge. These can be teaching tools that bridge curriculum, teacher knowledge, and student knowledge and experience. The teaching tools can only be strengthened if both students and teachers create opportunities to bridge local and global academic experiences into glocal literacy practices, thus intertwining cultural, social, and academic knowledge realms.

In past research on Dearborn, Michigan, Yemeni American girls, who typically came from print illiterate families, I found strong traditions of oral literacy practices, such as the recitation of religious text that served to encourage education and success in public school (Sarroub, 2005). The young women were actively engaged in studying a variety of texts in English and Arabic. The texts included typical school related materials and books. They also included texts that helped them subvert cultural and religious norms across home and school settings. Finally, their roles as the literate managers of the print texts (such as bills) that arrived in their homes helped them facilitate their family’s negotiation of health, school, and economic matters. Teachers in this school setting knew very little about these students’ engagement with texts and literacy in and out of school, even though this population (Yemen and Yemeni American) comprised nearly half of the school youth, and therefore missed certain opportuni-

ties for engaging students in relevant curricula. Also, in many instances, the young women were also young married women, and they supported working husbands from Yemen who, themselves, were print illiterate or who had no knowledge of English. Rowan et al. (2002) argued that current forms of literacy teaching omit boys, who resist adapting to and adopting a good reader identity, yet girls embrace this identity because it comes part and parcel with being good students and good girls, high status positions for girls within most school and home cultures. The relatively small number of teachers and administrators who really connected with the Yemeni American young women in this school understood the significance and value that was placed on education and transnationalism by the community, and therefore found ways to accommodate these students through formal and informal curricular reforms in the school (Sarroub, 2005).

Literacy in a Glocal World

There are two recent reports that argued for more attention to literacy for youth in grades 4-12. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) recommended 15 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs. They are explicit comprehension, effective instructional principles embedded in context, motivation and self-directed learning, text-based collaborative learning, strategic tutoring, diverse texts, intensive writing, technology, ongoing formative assessment of students, extended time for literacy, professional development, ongoing summative assessment of students and programs, teacher teams, leadership, and a comprehensive and coordinated literacy program. Kamil (2003) proposed that schools provide high-quality, ongoing professional development in literacy and coaching in particular. High schools face major challenges if they try to implement these recommendations. First, most English teachers are not prepared to be literacy teachers, and other content area teachers are not necessarily prepared to teach the range of struggling readers I describe earlier in the article. Second, No Child Left Behind policies expect that all teachers are trained to ac-

tually teach what they teach, and this is simply not possible under current conditions in American public schools, given the need to teach the numbers of students to pass the reading graduation demonstration exams, for example. Third, the notion of teaching reading to high school youth invites the culturally different norm of testing of skills that have traditionally been relegated to elementary schools. Although the high school, as a whole, finds this cultural difference perplexing and frustrating, low-SES, refugee, and immigrant students who attend high school with high hopes find themselves tested over and over again and in tracked curricula that emphasize the deficit they are perceived to have, rather than the interests and aspirations that they might pursue.

Despite many obstacles, research indicates that teachers and students are still succeeding at being and becoming literate globally, although this success is not consistent for all populations of students (Sarroub, 2007; Sarroub et al., 2007). Globalization is especially important as new migratory movements, both domestic and transnational, take root in the Midwest, and instruction that accounts for the glocal experiences of students across home and school settings is the key aspect of the cultural, institutional, communal, and linguistic changes currently taking place. Students would benefit from educators visiting their communities, knowing more about their languages, religions, and traditions, thus making vital connections between the realms of home and school. Educators and researchers must continue to address, however, why low-SES students are disproportionately placed in high school literacy classrooms.

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