



Minnesota Center for Reading Research

Research Brief

Multiple and Mobile Literacies for Immigrant Youth

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Mobility is not just a physical dimension, but a psychological and technological dimension in the lives of adolescent immigrants and refugees who stay connected in many ways with friends and family who live in many parts of the US, and the world. My talk for the MCRR explored the dimensions of mobility and literacy among, primarily, East African newcomers. The talk was framed by the following global and local questions:

- How can multilingual language and literacy skills be developed among immigrant adolescents in culturally relevant ways?
- How do teachers find pedagogies that enable youth to use multiple languages and literacies, helping them to become more empowered and speak back to the discourses that surround them?

In out-of-school spaces, youth often produce and disseminate multimodal (e.g., written text with images/video) and multilingual texts, from their own diverse and transnational vantage points and through the use of mobile technologies and social media. Is it possible to bring some of these literacy practices into classroom language learning activities? If so, how do educators use these practices without domesticating the literacy techniques in ways that reduce their value among teens. I argue that there is great potential for critical pedagogies, combined with media literacy to promote social agency and change. Literacy debates often have much more to do with literacy outcomes and attempt to create standardized practices. There is a great deal of local complexity in literacy education including links between literacy and cultural knowledge, identities and ideologies, all mediated by students' access.

In my talk I explored how literacy education has multiple dimensions for all students, but focused particularly on immigrant youth (Figure 1).

- Language modes include linking reading, writing, speaking and listening as well as integrating technology and media.
- Languages moves beyond encouraging the use of home languages and dialects to incorporate translanguaging, or mixing languages in internal and external processing.
- Culture includes leveraging home and community assets, a focus on youth culture and, importantly, conceptualizing culture as changing according to context and continually hybridizing.
- Literacies change across genre, discipline, and context and are intensely socially constructed among adolescents as they produce artifacts and experience more audiences for their work.
- The places for literacy are never static, but mobile technologies take literacy events beyond the school walls, as well as across national boundaries.



Figure 1: Dimensions of Multiple and Mobile Literacies

Our classroom pedagogies need to speak to young people who live in a connected world and experience international politics, sports, fashion, and their faith-based communities from uniquely multilingual and global positions.

There is great potential for networked, digital technology such as social media and digital production tools to make language learning immediately generative and productive. Immigrant and refugee background youth have instant, and often multilingual, audiences for the things they say and create.

Networked, digital technologies give youth opportunities to develop language, literacy and tech skills, participate in society, and thus, hopefully, develop relationships that can lead to more equitable and broader access to opportunities, despite the fact that youth don't always know exactly what their pathway might look like. Digital technologies can push at least some of the classroom learning time into workshop, inquiry, and production mode.

In sum, through my talk I argued that it is possible to find curricular, social spaces in classrooms that embrace all of these aspects of language and literacy. In such environments, immigrant students will be surprised with many new possibilities for literacy development while learning English, and developing home language literacies.

To learn more about Martha Bigelow's research with Somali adolescents, see these publications:

- Bigelow, M., & King, K. (2016). Peer interaction while learning to read in a new language. In M. Sato, & S. G. Ballinger (eds). *Peer interaction and second language learning* (pp. 349-375). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Bigelow, M. & King, K. (2014). Somali immigrant youths and the power of print literacy. *Writing Systems Research*, 6(2), 1-16.
- Bigelow, M. (2011). (Con)texts for cultural and linguistic hybridity among Somali Diaspora youth. *The New Educator*, 7(1), 27-43.
- Bigelow, M. (2010). *Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, racialized identity, and education in a new land*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bigelow, M. (2008). Somali adolescents' negotiation of religious and racial bias in and out of school. *Theory into Practice. Special Issue on Immigrant Education*, 47(1), 27-34.