

**Weaving multiple literacies: Somali children and
their teachers in the context of school culture**
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Abstract This ethnographic case study examines the relationship between literacies, school and community cultures by exploring literacy events as they unfold for Somali children in an elementary school. Fieldnotes and interviews involving Somali and school community members are analyzed based on the view that literacies are imbricated in cultural, racial and religious differences. Validating these differences within school culture is important so that children, instead of experiencing marginalization, can regain voice, power and self-worth. The data provide examples that legitimate children's personal and communal histories in the classroom. By proposing a *pedagogy of difference*, educators can chart possibilities for inclusion by weaving multiples literacies in school culture.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, LITERACIES, IDENTITY, SCHOOLING, PEDAGOGY

Literacy has traditionally been defined as the ability to read and write. In addition to being viewed as individual cognitive and linguistic skills, literacy is also seen as a sociocultural phenomenon. That is, literacy is defined according to the sociocultural group within which it is practiced and the aim for which it is appropriated. The definition of literacy carries with it an *-etic* dimension in that literacy is culture-specific, the nature of literacy differing from one group to another. As well, within each group there are different varieties of literacy. Accordingly, literacy is inherently plural, the term multiple literacies best capturing the notion that there are community-based literacies, personal literacies and school-based literacies. The Vai of Liberia (Scribner and Cole, 1974), the Berber of Morocco (Wagner, 1993) or, as in this study, the Somali are examples of groups that regularly *weave* multiple literacies. The literacies of these social groups are rooted in oral and written forms imbricated in religion, gender, race, culture, identity, ideology and power.

Literacy is synonymous with literate behaviour. It incorporates ways of talking, reading, writing, valuing, that is, ways of being in the world (Gee, 1991). The school, a culture in its own right, has constructed school-based ways of thinking and behaving (Michaels, 1989). Students engage in school-based literacies to the degree they are enculturated into ways of thinking, talking, valuing, and behaving that underlie school culture. School-based literacy practices are often less accessible to non-mainstream children since their personal and community literacies related to their home culture, with their characteristic values and ways of making sense, are seldom represented in the culture of the school (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1991; Heath, 1984). Differences between home socialization and school expectations can often contribute to school failure. Students' inadequate knowledge base and resources are often perceived to be the reason. But what about the institutions and the educational agents? Several studies, cited by Davis and Golden (1994) point out that educators do not often adopt programs and practices that are responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Preservice and inservice programs have failed to change attitudes, and providing information and opportunity for reflection about minorities have been ineffective. Kindergarten teachers, for example, have beliefs and attitudes on language, literacy and social behaviour that reflect school culture and their own sociocultural experiences. These individual practices are supported by and embedded within the educational system. There is tension within institutions attempting to change while at the same time holding on to a school culture that represents mainstream values. For African

youth however, present schools and structures serve to alienate and marginalize (Dei, 1994). How can we chart possibilities to include children marginalized by institutions?

This article, a study of Somali children weaving multiple literacies, examines familiar assumptions about literacies, about community and school cultures and the relationship between literacies and cultures. Cultural differences have been examined (Cazden & Mehan, 1989; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1991; Heath, 1986; Michaels, 1989). More recently, Ernst-Slavin (1997) studied discursive practices in a grade 1 classroom with Spanish-speaking children of Mexican descent in an attempt to understand how teachers' actions and interactions can be supportive or not of the learning experiences of the students. She found that children's variety of Spanish was seldom validated in the classroom and that teachers often promoted the language norm. She discussed the impact that linguistic and cultural exclusion could have on the children's learning and identity formation.

In the present study, the intent is to problematize cultural differences in order to explore the relationship between power and situated/interested knowledge and the ideology that serves to maintain the relative power of the participants in this particular setting¹. Since power-knowledge relationships are maintained in terms of inclusion/exclusion, who, what and how does formal education marginalize? We examine which literacies are taken up, by whom and in what context. In the process, we hope to find out how a given discourse is legitimated. Moreover, views about home and school cultures from the data lead us to propose that teachers should engage in a pedagogy that legitimates voice² in diversity. Students' reading the word and the world differently is rooted in and influenced by social cultures and social histories.

We begin by providing a brief introduction to the social structure of Somalia. Then, we describe the research site and systematically analyze the data by looking at how individuals are socialized into literacy practices in Somalia (being literate in L1) and how literacy events unfold in school in Canada, in particular in the home room and during the ESL period (becoming literate in L2). Next, one of the researchers acting as a tutor with the children weaves together L1 and L2 literacies, an approach that includes personal and communal histories of the Somali children. In the discussion, we explore identity formation that ethnic-minority children bring to their reading the world and the word (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Identity is tied to gender,

ableness, culture, social class, language, race, and religion. Identity and literacies cannot be dissociated. In this study, both are about power, voice and self-worth. We conclude by proposing that educators weave multiple literacies within a pedagogy of difference. The latter is about inclusion and demarginalization through validation and interrogation of different voices. In the end, this process is designed to open up possibilities for teachers and students to challenge their assumptions about the relationship between power and knowledge.

Somalia, the land and the people

Somalia is located in the Horn of Africa. About 70 percent of the population of 6.5 million are shepherds. The people live in groups of clans (e.g. Isaks, and Hawiye clans) which may form extended families. An extended family might consist of a grandfather and his wives, several of his sons and their wives, and all the grandchildren. Married daughters live with their husbands' clan groups.

Somalia became independent from Britain and Italy in 1972. During most of that time Mohammed Siad Barre was president as a result of a military coup and was finally driven from office by armed rebels in January 1991. Even though Somalis are for the most part united by one language and one religion, Somali and Islam, under Mohammed Siad Barre, Somalia has been left deeply divided along tribal lines as clans (seven major clans) fight for supremacy.

Up until Somalia's independence in 1972, the history of Somalis' literacies resembled that of many developing countries dominated by colonialist regimes. English was the official language of school and government institutions and Italian the language of higher education at the university. Arabic was the language of the Koran while Somali had no written script. In 1972, an official Roman alphabet was adapted for writing in Somali. As part of the Cushitic languages, Somali is not mutually intelligible with any other language used in Somalia (Lewis, 1993). Moreover, depending on the region and the clan, Somalis speak one or more of the Somali dialects that are used for informal and everyday communication. In some rural and urban areas, Arabic may still be used for unofficial transactions and in personal correspondence. Today, the language of school and government is Somali; Italian remains the language used at the university. Despite the power and prestige of Italian and English, Somali and Arabic as well as religious customs significantly impact the daily lifestyle of Somalis³.

The Study

The study was designed to examine several aspects of home and school culture: the community (Somali, school), the participants (children, parents, social workers, school personnel) and events (from children's arrival at the school board's reception centre to various activities in the classroom, in the playground and outside the school). We were able simultaneously to fine-tune the research questions that evolved from the broader issues that centered on examining familiar assumptions about literacies, about community and school cultures. We adopted an ethnographic approach (1) to study school-based literacies as ways of reading, writing, talking and understanding in relation to ways of being literate in L1, (2) to reflect critically on the issue of power and interested knowledge that is linked to the construction of multiple literacies when two or more unequal social groups cohabit, and (3) to chart possibilities for schools to legitimate community cultures, ones that include children's personal and communal histories to regain voice, power and self-worth.

The case study is part of a larger study in which data were collected from many sources, members of the Somali community, a social worker, elementary classroom teachers, a school liaison officer, and school personnel who taught ESL to Somali, Ethiopian and Kurdish adults. In this article, the themes uncovered during analysis were based on field notes, interviews and artifacts related to the case study. Segments of data presented herein have representational value as excerpts taken from extended and systematic observations and ongoing analyses.

The research process was based on a team research method of triangulation (Taylor & Bogdon, 1984) consisting of two graduate students and the professor as team leader. The role of the researchers was important in this study. All members of the team were female. None spoke Somali. The first researcher, Diana, was involved in second language teacher education at the university. During her contact with schools and school officials, she raised the issue of literacy practices of children from non-mainstream homes and the importance of affirming these literacies in the classroom along with school-based literacy. The second researcher, Marina, was both a participant observer and a voluntary ESL teacher for the two Somali children. Her previous experience as a teacher of minority children in Western Canada helped her understand

the public school construction as well as the ways in which the minority students, in this case the ESL children, created meaning through language. Her concern for this special situation resembled her own experiences with early literacy practices in German and the different ways she saw the world as a child in comparison to her other classmates. The third researcher, Susan, had a similar religious and cultural background to the Somali community. Her understanding of the community that was heavily influenced by religious and clan structure was an asset in the interpretation of data. Furthermore, similar to the other two researchers, her life long struggle for creating meaning and accepting change and cultural differences was helpful in understanding what Somali children were experiencing.

Entry into The Setting

The school site, Aberwood elementary school, was chosen because of the large influx of Somali refugees into the Ottawa-Kingston community and school districts. In comparison to the various cultural groups attending the school, the Somali population had increased at a high rate since September 1989 and educational officials considered them "the most problematic group" in need of special ESL tutoring. Moreover, the recent influx of Somali children in the Ottawa-Kingston schools had left many educational officials unprepared.

The children in the school came from many countries (e.g. Lebanon, Ethiopia, Poland, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey). At the time of this research the two Somali children had just arrived in Canada. Ahmad and Fatimah, siblings aged 9 and 10 respectively, were placed in grades 3 and 4. They had spent the last five years in Ethiopian camps with their grandmother and away from their parents who had moved to the United States. After the death of their grandmother, they were reunited with their parents who at the time were living in the Ottawa-Kingston area. According to the school officials, the children had not attended any school in the camp. They had no knowledge of English.

Data Collection

There were 15 visits to Aberwood school from mid-January until the last school day in June. A teachers' strike during the first two weeks in May prevented us from working at the

school. Data collection took place in three phases: (a) before the teacher strike, the order of events provided data-gathering situations in the staff room, ESL nook, supply room, corridors, library, and homeroom when films were shown, and (b) after the strike, observations in the playground and in the mainstream classroom. The third phase came in the Fall (October) when we interviewed Marina, one of the researchers, who was offered a teaching position as an ESL teacher at Aberwood. We wanted to have her perspective as an "insider". This data was added to the previous information. Moreover, examples of school-based literacy practices were collected from a number of other Somali children in higher grade levels who had not only attended the school for 2-4 years but had also taken up the role as translators and peerbuddies for the newcomers.

Data was triangulated through participant observation, formal and informal interviews with the children, school staff, community informants, samples of the children's writing, and informal procedures for the evaluation of children's first and second language skills. School staff and Somalian informants were interviewed at an informal meeting and other informants who were pressed for time were interviewed over the phone (Somali embassy personnel and a Somali community leader). Marina was responsible for on site participant observation. As a classroom volunteer, participant observer, and ESL tutor in an ESL classroom for one day a week on Fridays she took intensive notes on various literacy activities (oral and written) in the first and second language. Every time Marina returned from her Friday visits to the school, the field notes, recorded data and interviews taking place that week were transcribed and prepared for further reflections and discussions with Diana before the next Friday visit. During these sittings we discussed various ways of gaining more "insider knowledge" by analyzing the teacher-children interactions, reviewing previous ways of inquiry and proposing new ones (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). This procedure was repeated until the end of the data collection period. After all data had been transcribed, Sue-san began coding the material. Again during group meetings, we reviewed our initial assumptions, systematically pulled together and analyzed the coded data to look for recurrent patterns to form relevant themes.

Being Literate in the Home Culture

Immigration of any group of people into an alien situation is not only a physical movement of the citizens but also an immigration of their ethnic identity and their ways of viewing the world. Identity formation is realized not only through language, culture, and politics but also through gender, race, social class, and religion. A part of identity may be packaged into what may be referred to as 'owned' literacy. Interviews with members of the Somali community in this study suggest that 'being literate' and owning literacies are embedded in their ideological beliefs and values. Unfortunately in terms of the minority students, research indicates that basic educational and social politics are frequently biased towards Eurocentric mainstream societies (Gee, 1991; Giroux, 1989). Literate practices of minority students do not always stem from similar or even somewhat related social, cultural, and political experiences (Gee, 1991; Giroux, 1992). There is almost inevitably a mismatch between the literacy owned by the uprooted people and the literacy owned by those mainstream groups that may be named 'other' literacy.

Somalis learn several kinds of literacies: home-based, religious, and school-based. Similar to what Scribner and Cole have reported in their study on literacy with the Vai of Liberia (1974), each type of literacy engages a different type of language. Since Somali did not have a written script prior to 1972, Somali home-based literacy was and to some extent still is oral⁴. In the Somali tradition, poems and songs are the main means of communication and poetry plays an important part in their culture. The nation's history, which dates back thousands of years, is recorded in poems that have never been written down and are passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another. The ways that Somalian people view themselves and take part in their society may be interpreted through family literacy practices. From the communal family perspective, literacy practices take on a collaborative meaning as a preferred mode over an individualistic conception of literacy.

As I was talking about reading. You see we are not (in our) background readers people. (Ali, a Somali university student)

Most Somalis are Muslims. The children are exposed to religious-based literacy that develops in a parallel manner to home-based literacy. Koranic schooling, which is primarily

responsible for the development of Koranic literacy (classical Arabic), involves rote memorization of the Koran in order to recite and possibly write some Koranic verses without actually comprehending what has been written or read. In Canada, while maintaining close ties among Somali families, Somalis have come together with other nationalities to run a private Islamic school. According to the children at Aberwood school, their mothers attend regular Koranic schools and religious gatherings that have also been set up to assist their children in Koranic literacy.

You have to learn by heart. Koranic school at four, and the parent teach praying. Sometimes be to the mosque. And around five years you have to read. Somebody more read but everyone must have to read some Koran everyday." (Ali, Somali university student)

In 1972, school-based literacy in standard Somali was adopted by all public institutions such as schools and government. At the secondary level, school children learn English or French as a second language, and finally at the university level, Italian is the official language of instruction. However, the majority of Somali children do not continue beyond primary schooling.

The Somalian people respect education. In the clan, say we have some educated in the clan who has his master degree. They respect because we are a nomadic people and we don't have much education. We are not in our background educated. If someone graduate high school, even high school they ask why are you going to continue your education. You just finished all this." (Ali, Somali university student).

In Canada, Somalis have constructed a Somalian community, a 'little' Somalia, through religious practices and social gatherings. In this way the oral tradition and communal ways of living among Somalian families manifest themselves in the modern ways of talking, telephoning, visiting friends and family with their children.

The Somali men especially choose specific socializing spots in Ottawa-Kingston at central well-known shopping centers as well as at the Muslim Mosque.

We meet at the mosque. Sometimes some place like the Eastern shopping center. They have cafeterias or something like that. Somali people are social people,

they live like social. They come to Canada, they live in Ottawa-Kingston, they live together... two, three, they share houses, the homes. (Ali, Somali university student)

Social gatherings and social chatting are preferred over reading:

Yes, our leisure activity is social activity. They talk more... We don't have special games. Traditional games we do have some in the rural area. We playing with the ground, so most of the time we talk. We talk by telephone or party. (Ali, Somali university student)

From the perspective of the community and the family, daily living activities take on a collaborative meaning in which members of the community rarely involve themselves with individual activities. Excerpts from the data suggest that Somalis gain their strength in group membership and group activity in such a way that even working alone or living alone is not common in their culture. Parents in high-rise subsidized buildings in Ottawa-Kingston have been known to leave their children in the playground with the assurance that other families will take care of them. Back home the clans that form large extended families rely on help from their neighbors. In this way, religion and social structure seem to influence the ways Somali children grow up in their world.

Yes is (Somali culture) very different. Is very different. I can't live alone, I can't even work alone. Even work... we must have a friend, we must have a group. Yes especially tribe group. Tribe, it's the one that count, yes. (Ali, Somali university student)

When we begin to examine closely literacy practices which Somali students engage in, we can look to dominant literacies, school-based literacies in Somali (Italian at the university) and ESL in the present context. How is this knowledge base legitimated in the classroom as part of students' voices and histories? How do communal values into which Somali children are socialized get constructed in the school culture? In the next section, we turn to literacy practices and how they unfold in an Ottawa-Kingston school that includes a significant representation from the Somali community.

Becoming Literate in the New School Culture

The culturally-diverse social setting at Aberwood was a known fact to the staff and to the board of education.

We also had Ramadan which was nice because you could give that religion some attention and some status. We all respected that. The kids didn't have to go to the lunch rooms. (Marina)

However, linking appropriate cultural meaning to the curriculum, especially in the ESL class, that would be responsive to the learners' needs was not readily apparent. Most of the staff in the school came from a white mainstream background. Interviews with the personnel provided insights about their views on literacy and the social and cultural history of the ethnic children.

The Somalians have limited writing skills, and they come from an oral culture, so only those educated before 1971 have an academic background ... Somalians are a puzzling group as they are unlike any other immigrant group in the city. (school board liaison officer)

School opened at 9:00 a.m. with the Canadian National Anthem, and morning announcements. Then the Somali children and other ESL learners left the home-room classroom for 40 minutes of instruction in English reading and writing (commonly referred to as pull-out sessions). After the ESL class everyone went back to their home-room and did work in math and language arts. In the afternoon, the children remained in the same home-rooms and continued their daily work.

The home-room teacher was one of the elementary teachers on staff who got to own major classroom space. The teachers followed a more or less set grade level program that had usually been determined by the authorities at the school board. As soon as teachers identified children who were lower than class average in their language skills and who could not keep up with the regular curriculum, they were automatically placed in ESL pull-out sessions directed by an ESL teacher.

The ESL teacher might be referred to as minority staff who provided second language services to not only different grade levels but also different age groups. A combination of ESL

students attended their pull-out sessions together. The ESL teachers needed to have a versatile language program suitable for the needs of individual second language learners. Quite often, the ESL teachers were obliged to include more one-on-one work in their limited schedule with the students.

Between the 7th and 8th visit at Aberwood, Marina conducted separate interviews with Mary, the grade 4 classroom teacher (Fatimah's teacher) and Ann, the ESL teacher for both children. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into their concepts of literacy and to see how they attempted to link school and home cultures in a multicultural setting. The interviews, observations and materials were analyzed for recurrent patterns and clustered into themes. Accordingly, two themes were uncovered from the analysis of the data: (1) views about literacy education and (2) views on school and community cultures.

Homeroom-based literacy

The first interview was conducted with Fatimah's grade 4 teacher, Mary. She expressed her views about school and community cultures in the following way:

I like my children to feel comfortable in the classroom... I'm thinking of a little girl I got in from Turkey who knew nothing in September when I got her. And everyday at newstime, the routines are very consistent... There is a lot of repetition with opening exercises, calendar, weather, diary, and getting up for news... thinking of this little girl from Turkey, she would bring anything from home to show, anywhere that she has been, their own personal experience or anything like that to talk about.

Mary made a serious attempt to make the children feel comfortable. What she stressed was that, in this case, the girl from Turkey enjoyed communicating with the class through her belongings from home. It was not apparent whether what she showed or talked about were from her parents and family, artifacts from Turkey or personal belongings that she valued. In any case her home was brought to class through the home-room morning news sessions and it was something valued by the teacher as well as the students. Mary also said that she made use of other bilingual students and that this appeared to be regular classroom procedure:

If the children are able to help another student with the different languages well yes definitely I let them. Fatimah was very fortunate because other children from

Somalia helped her. The little girl from Turkey is also very eager to help too because I think she knows what it was like to come and not know anything.

However when talking about the inclusion of parents (in this case Somali parents) in school, Mary was hesitant:

I have very little contact with parents. Mainly maybe the language difficulty. I see a role for the parents eventually yes... maybe get more parents in, in another year or two when we'll get to know the parents we have now better. May be we can call them in later. If I had a problem and if I wanted to speak to the parent I would send a note home rather than phone because I would be hesitant at whoever I got on the other end.

How would the parents eventually be known was unclear. What was apparent from Mary's interview was that contrary to the Somali oral culture, several parents conformed in one way or another to the school system of communicating through the written medium. Several parents participated by asking friends to write notes to the school. Fatimah's parents corresponded directly with the teacher. Fatimah and Ahmad's father was a physician who was educated in the United States. His ways of communicating with the school was different from other Somali families who were often absent from the school picture. He was thus easier to understand as a Somali by the teacher.

Concerning the theme, literacy education, Mary found importance in what she called *back to the basics* while at the same time allowing peerbudies to help with orientation in the school:

Children like the ones who have just arrived come with no English. So we have to go back to the basics: the colors, numbers, parts of the body, things we use each day in the classroom, locations in the school are usually within the first hour or so. When the child comes in I usually pair the child up with somebody in the classroom. If I have a child of the same nationality, the same language, I make use of that. And I have the student take the child around the school to different locations..

Acquiring literacy at the basic levels constituted a rather formal learning situation where the teacher took on a central role and "key" to all language learning:

Reading is repeating and going over vocabulary first, before you can get into reading. You need a basic vocabulary first and then just very basic short sentences. In terms of writing, mostly first their own personal diary. We usually start it and often they'll tell you what they wish to say and I'll write short sentences and they'll repeat it back...the school as an institution has an important role but I think the teacher is the one responsible for doing most of the literacy; the teacher is the key.

This excerpt suggests that Mary voices authority and this can be seen through the specific forms of literacy and knowledge sanctioned in the materials and approach used in the classroom. Her views on language seem to indicate that she adheres to specific norms that reinforce standard or dominant forms of language.

In summary, Mary's comments and her commitment was apparent from the time and energy she devoted to her class and her work with the minority students. She had mainstream expectations of verbal and social behaviour. Her view of literacy and how it got defined according to a mainstream perspective was important for understanding the type of strategies she would develop to encourage students' acquisition of school-based literacies. Within that mainstream view, cultural diversity was celebrated in the classroom. However, the role of the family and the community in the school was marginalized. In contrast in African society, the community as a whole assumes responsibility for the socialization and education of the young. There is a sense of collective commitment among them to reproduce communal values (Dei, 1994). In the following interview with the ESL teacher similar themes emerged as with the home-room teacher.

ESL-based literacy

The setting was the ESL teacher's room during the fifteen minute morning recess break. The person being interviewed was Ann, the ESL teacher for whom the volunteer work had been done during the past seven morning visits to the school. Her class list consisted of 42 international children at the elementary level, and 16 at the kindergarten level. The largest nationality of students was Somalis, Cambodians and Iranians.

The analysis of the transcribed interview with Ann revealed two emerging themes: views about literacy education and views on school and community cultures. Furthermore, her perspective on the relationship between language and literacy in L1 and in L2 impacted significantly her views on the relationship between school and community. Regarding literacy, she expressed her ideas in the following way:

When someone is literate...that they have an understanding of a ... when someone reads them a story. They are able to recognize things that are in print, some of the beginning literacy skills for my ESL kids would be tracking visually with their eyes. To go from left to right on a page. Even, if I am reading a story, sort of paying attention focusing in to the pictures that are sort of coordinating what I am saying. I stress comprehension.

The materials used for reading included Richard Scarry books, and Sesame Street books with an emphasis on a phonics approach to reading. Writing consisted of copying syllables and words. Her perspective on literacy was further exemplified in a reading comprehension exercise given to Jamila, a Somali student. It was a multiple-choice task and she was not able to select any items as possible answers. Marina, the researcher was asked to work with her. Jamila's responses revealed a strong use of personal experience and background knowledge. For example, her explanation for why parents would eat by candlelight, she would say: 'not to disturb the children sleeping nearby'. However, the textbook answer was a power failure. One-room homes in Africa are fairly typical. In another example, Jamila imagined the police were chasing a car because they were after a fugitive, 'the police chased a car to check if someone was hiding in the trunk'. The textbook answer was because they may have driven through a red light. If Marina had not asked Jamila to give her own answer, she would have left her work blank as she had done in previous classes.

When Marina asked Ann about her views on activities that would enhance speaking, listening and writing, she replied:

Communication first of all, it's sort of a basic. And then learning sort of the more conventional patterns of speech so that the kids sound more natural when they're in situations. For listening paying attention, I guess and looking at the person that is speaking...For writing trying to express ideas. The focus isn't on grammar or correct spelling or punctuation. It's trying to get ideas expressed through print.

The definition of writing given in the interview showed that Ann stressed expression. However, evidence from seatwork, classroom observation, and instructions to Marina when working with students suggested that accuracy was stressed. For example, the 'diary' consisted in copying sentences, and two students refused to attempt a creative spelling of a word despite Marina's

assurance that she would edit it before their teacher read it.

Being uncertain about the role of literacy in Somali children, Ann infrequently turned to bilingual children in her class as helpers to the newcomers:

The bilingual Somali children are not literate, the ones that we have they're not literate in their first language and after a year and a half they have a very, very low literacy level and they're struggling so much that I don't see them as helping new arrivals at all.

While Ann did not appear to disapprove of the use of Somali in class, she revealed dissatisfaction when it was used. When Somali children were involved together in an activity in the class, a lot of talk was going on in English and in Somali. The teacher told the children to "stop bickering". Later she commented on the high volume of discussion and the "bickering" in Somali when they worked together. The collaborative learning practices of the Somali combined with the use of their first language makes them a boisterous group in the classroom. Dei (1994) has pointed out that historically Africans have been socialized to define themselves by their social obligations to the wider community and that includes providing communal forms of labor. Dei raises the issue of how African children can "reclaim these elements of their cultures to address problems of their daily livelihood "(p 23) in a school culture where they are seen to produce dissonant voices.

Concerning the second theme, links between school and community cultures, Ann expressed the following views:

It would be a valuable resource. It is difficult when two cultures get together to try andthey have their own set values and it's difficult to impose your expectations on the other. And it's important that they meet. I don't know how much influence they have on each other.

On the role of the parents, Ann confirmed the visits of some of the Somali fathers but since her role as the ESL teacher in the system was somewhat peripheral, the parents might have been visiting the home-room teacher more often.

A couple of families, the fathers, come for interviews and they sometimes drop in sort of unexpectedly, to ask how the kids are doing... Contact usually works both ways. Unless there was a problem the school would just approach probably at interview times, which is just two or three times a year. That's more formal, whereas the parent might just arrive at the school....it seems that the parents, the fathers now are either working or going to school so they're not available during the school day.

When asked about the role parents could play in the development of their children's literacy, she responded:

Well, I would hope so. They don't always. In terms of even telling stories to their children, reading stories to their children, taking an interest in and listening to their children read to them. Providing materials for them or going to the library with them. That's something that I would hope for, but....

News briefs about Somali people in Canada seemed to have made Ann believe that the Somali community was too involved with their own problems and that literacy learning for that community was not a concern at the moment.

They are trying to establish themselves, get a network, ...and many other things that are more immediate to them... My sense is that a lot of the Somalis, new arrivals, are not literate. So it's difficult for them if those aren't values that are entrenched in them, to promote them in their children. Depending on the background of the person involved.

In summary, Ann appeared to be heavily influenced by views of language and literacy learning in which reading seem to predicated on stages of development beginning with smaller units of comprehension and graduating to larger ones. Similarly, in writing, she seemed to be concerned that the children work with models of conventional writing. While she would hope to bring in the cultural and linguistic experiences of the students, it was not apparent how those experiences that give meaning to her students' lives could be included in their learning the

second language and a second literacy. Mary, the home-room teacher, attempted to go beyond the mainstream culture to give the children voice. Her reliance on the children in the class validated the contribution they could make in the school culture. Both teachers, however, seemed to share more traditional views about reading and writing. The teacher responses in this study draw our attention to the need for more research into the attitudes and reflections of teachers as major constructors and contributors to school-based literacy programs.

Researcher-Children Weaving Multiple Literacies

The second visit to Aberwood was Marina's first day of interacting with the two Somali children. Ann had originally planned a skating field trip. The two Somali children, Fatimah and Ahmad, who had never skated before were to remain behind. However, when Marina volunteered to skate with them, Ann agreed to include the students. All this proved in vain as the rain had made skating on the canal unsafe. Instead it would be a video morning and hot chocolate would be served at recess. The video chosen by democratic vote was 'Pippi Longstocking'. Ahmed and Fatmah also watched the video. Hot chocolate with mini marshmallows was served at recess. Both Somali student's needed some instruction on how to consume the beverage with marshmallows. After these activities, Ahmad and Fatimah went with Marina for an intensive ESL tutoring session.

Tutoring site. The equipment room became the site for Marina's 'pull-out' sessions. There were some encyclopedias and old texts as well as TVs, VCRs, trolleys, and tape recorders. In the middle of the room was a rectangular table with 6 chairs.

Marina wanted to work out of a pedagogy that is supportive of cultural differences. "If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher" (Bernstein, cited in Cazden and Mehan, 1989). Accordingly, the project with the two Somali children attempted to bring together literacies, identity, and traditions that would provide the children with a sense of voice and a link between school and community cultures.

Marina had total autonomy. In this context, Marina's interaction with the children meant sharing the teaching-learning space because it was important to her not only to provide direct

instruction but also to scaffold the children's engagement with literacy so that both students could have greater autonomy within that space. Her approach was to provide opportunities for constructing literacy in English and for learning through active participation relying on both languages and cultures. Marina researched material about the Somali culture and attempted to provide the children with a theme that might have been familiar from home.

The following episode represented Marina's view on accepting, integrating and appropriating differences. She found that 'back home' the status of a camel was akin to the North American view of the car. Both urban and rural Somalis view camels as status symbols. Hence the selection of a camel theme was to help ensure interest and meaningfulness for the children. Introducing the Somali culture sparked L1 verbal exchange between the children:

We started making camels... After several minutes Fatimah gestured that the camel I had done was 'no Somali'. They then put a second hump on the clay camel and said 'Somali'. I realized that my camel was a dromedary and that in Somalia they had camels not dromedaries. Then we made people to go on our camels. The children explained (in Somali and with gestures) how one sits on a camel and how one packs a camel... (Marina's field notes)

After two sessions of activities, they began to interact with Marina in Somali and with gestures.

In the next episode, all children were to come to school with hats they had made as a home assignment. On *hat-day*, Ahmad and Fatimah came to school with no hats because it seemed that the children's parents were not notified of this activity. The hats were then made during the intensive ESL tutoring session. It was a good opportunity for Marina to work with colors, shapes, and numbers.

As a means of assessing their knowledge of English colors, we would say the colors as we selected the paper... At the same time we reviewed their number recognition by pressing the digital counter of the photocopier. Ahmad particularly enjoyed this activity and counted up to 50. Fatimah took more time selecting colors and did not participate in this quiz. Ahmad, while waiting, also picked up a phonics book (approximately Grade 1) and sounded out words letter by letter (up to four letter words). (Marina's field notes)

After the paper was collected they began making hats:

The students decided on Fez style hats although I had demonstrated cones and pirate styles to them... Fatimah made a purple, pink and yellow fez and Ahmad made a purple, orange, yellow and blue fez. Both giggled and appeared delighted with the results of their work. They eagerly left the room and wore their hat back to class for lunch. (Marina's field notes)

During the 8th visit, Marina helped Ahmad finish his diary activity from his homeroom and then through a drawing activity she worked on writing:

He was given writing supplies and unlined paper and asked to do 'something'. Initially he did nothing, but when I showed him my work and nodded that he should do likewise, he began to copy my work. He was quiet at first, but soon began to speak to me in Somali. I would point to items in his picture and ask 'Somali'? He would then answer me with a word or a sentence in Somali. (Marina's field notes)

In summary, Marina attempted to bring together linguistic and sociocultural forms of knowledge from Somali as a means through which literacy learning could occur. It was a pedagogy that legitimated children's histories and traditions within school culture. While in the previous section differences were accepted, in this section, Marina attempted to bridge and integrate cultures and languages in a pedagogy of difference.

In this project, by reading the world of these children with camels, their subjectivities (ways of being) left the margins. When Marina was interviewed as an ESL teacher at Aberwood the next school term she said that validating Somali children's literacy was important. Many of their peers as well as staff doubted whether these children had any literacy knowledge. One day, Marina brought in books related to African and Somali culture including the Koran. The Somali children headed toward the Koran and displayed book knowledge and literacy skills that had not been shown prior to this experience. Her attempts opened up possibilities for dialogue between teacher and students in the validation of identity and culture through the use of the first language, Somali and Koranic literacy, Arabic. As such, students can speak with a voice and from a position that is situated and rooted in their sense of history and place. Weaving multiple literacies in this context is constructed out of identity, ways of being that include cultural, race and religious differences. Although bringing in such books in a public school might be

problematic, their presence can contribute to a sense of self-worth. In a similar way later on, Marina brought in parents into the school in ways that differed from previous times. We named that shift as one going beyond *school-home contact* to *school-home bonding*. Family-members who had been marginalized took up significant space in the process of their children's education. The following section provides an example.

Home-school bonding

When Marina became a full-time ESL teacher, she reflected on her previous experience with the school and also made an attempt to invite parents to her class to help with the children.

When I first came in I was led to believe that the Somalian kids were very difficult to deal with, and to address their needs it's so hard to do... all those complaints and those generalizations are really unfounded in my experience. I do not find Somalian kids, so often they are signalled out as being aggressive or so verbal ...or so hard to talk to parents so hard to deal with. I can refute absolutely every one of those comments... (Interview with Marina when hired as an ESL teacher)

When parents were invited, they responded with a sense of uneasiness because they were not comfortable with the English language and were not sure if they could be of any assistance.

We (school staff) are just so intimidating ... and they are not venturing in here. The parent said once I don't speak English how can I come and help... well you have two hands two ears and just come and help. Now she comes and listens to them read and she knows when they are cheating in the card game. She has a common language with them and she had no idea that is O.K. and the kids see her doing that. (Marina)

This view persisted. Acceptance of the status quo by the school mismatched attempts to improve the learning experience for non-mainstream children.

We had multicultural day ... They had one guest speaker Fatimah and Ahmed's father and embassy personnel. It was like guest lectures and the children got to wear their costume. It was done in an academic way... (Marina)

The previous excerpt echoes the need to "re-imagine and recreate instructional context" to incorporate linguistic and cultural experiences of minority children (Ernst-Slavin, 1997) in ways that validate the experiences of children of African descent (Dei, 1994). Moreover, this requires an understanding of the significance of religion in the culture of the children. Ali mentioned that Somali parents didn't want to see male children write to female pen-pals as a school activity.

I told you they don't like to see their children going to spoil their culture, they only like to learn but not impose [Canadian culture]. (Ali)

Marina reiterated the importance of religion:

I also had Arab students and speaking Arab and being Muslim seems to be something that transcends all kinds of barrier...no matter what language they spoke or what country they came from they had this in common...(Marina)

While clan membership is still seen to be important, its capital value seems to have shifted. Heller (1987) suggests that the values back home can take on different values in the new culture.

The kids amongst themselves discern between their clans...the south, the north Isak or Mahran... when a new groups of kids arrived the whole issue of war in Somalia would come to us...that was what most of the kids would be sharing the war experience and that would prompt a whole tribalism in the group...the longer they've been here, the less they seem to care about that. (Marina)

In the end, the importance of actively involving the community in the education of young children of African descent is a cultural form of socialization. These are important considerations and a challenge to contemporary education especially when you consider that schooling should be about inclusion through power, voice and self-worth. In the next section, we explore these issues.

Where are we? Where to now?

In studies that investigate literacy events in the classroom, teachers come to the task of literacy learning with already constructed reading formations that often go unchallenged. In the

words of Bourdieu (1982:399), "How could teachers avoid unconsciously bringing into play the values of the milieu from which they come, or to which they now belong when teaching and assessing their pupils?" Through institutions, teachers are authorized to uphold specific norms about language and what counts as knowledge. However, when teachers begin to reflect on and question familiar assumptions about their beliefs regarding literacy and the dominant discourse in classroom, they can come to acknowledge that reading formations are not always fixed. Minority students also enter school with their own formation informing their classroom literacy practices which are differently constructed and situated historically and socially (Masny, 1996). When teachers and students begin to adopt a critical perspective with regard to literacies that support dominant ideologies they start looking at "new ways of reading the past and present as a way of reclaiming power, voice, and a sense of self-worth".

In this study, there was a culture of silence around issues of power, voice, and self-worth. Take the view of self-worth as expressed by Kashiell a graduate foreign student at the university who reflected on his early experiences in Canada:

When I was in Nigeria my mother was black and my father was black. My teacher at school was black and even our principal was black. As a matter of fact our president was black too. I never had to deal with the issue of my blackness until I came to Canada. Here being black is definitely an issue. (Kashiell)

For Kashiell, an educated black man, it was an issue that could even block the construction of a successful life style. In Nigeria at an early age he was sure that he would go to the highest point in education. In Canada, he was not sure if he were raised as a black minority he would choose education over all other non-academic options. Ogbu (cited in Sylvester, 1994) pointed out that for many Afro-American children, school performance is not often perceived as the way to succeed. Such stereotypical beliefs can lead children away from the academic track to the drop-out track, cultures of failure (Statzner, 1994).

On the issue of voice, immigrant children learn what might be viewed as the voice of dominance, Standard English. Quite often it is expected that children have Standard English when they come to school. They are stigmatized for not having *a priori* the linguistic and cultural capital that schools are supposed to be facilitating (Bourdieu, 1971). When the children

come to school, they cannot practice what they do not have, and they are exposed mainly to a process of acquiring dominant discourses. The latter are at variance with their own discourses, those that constitute their "identity kits", ways of being in the world (Gee, 1991). Ways of being in the world, according to Gee, refers to ways of talking and valuing and relates to the home and community literacies which the Somali students have been socialized into. Henry (1993) pointed out that educational literature about Black children in Canada reflects such notions of "disadvantage" and "underachievement", thus perpetuating the "ideological construction of Black underachievement". In this study, students could be perceived to be academic non-achievers. Consider some of the reading material or the writing activities. Some students could not answer questions in the exercises on inferencing nor could they comprehend reading passages while working with Sesame textbooks. Classroom textbooks represent dominant authoritative discourse. The choosing of textbooks seldom goes unquestioned. Since the children in this research were from a minority culture as well as a black culture in a white community, their voices and personal histories should be included in a teaching/learning paradigm (Henry, 1993). It opens up possibilities for teachers and students to interrogate and challenge the knowledge-power relationship around language, literacies, and textbooks (Auerbach, 1993).

On power, the greatest uneasiness was felt perhaps around the role of parents in this study. Coming from a different culture and with a different language, it was viewed that family members did not understand school culture. One exception was the relationship between the two children in this study and their parents who were schooled in the United States. They knew school-based ways. It was perceived that the other Somali parents had little time for their children's education because they were preoccupied with economic issues. In contrast, in the section on home-school bonding, Marina legitimated other forms of parent participation that once had been considered marginal. It was important for her to communicate to the parents that they could come and whenever possible to come and help out in the classroom. The shift away from home-school contact toward home-school bonding attempts to link school and community cultures. The latter are rooted in community literacies and personal histories that parents bring to the classroom.

Conclusion : Toward a Pedagogy of Difference

This case study centered on how literacy events unfolded in a specific Ottawa-Kingston community. Reflecting on the analyses of the data led to us to propose some views about literacy education and about school and community cultures. One proposal is that cultural differences could take on new meanings within a pedagogy of difference that encourages children, according to Giroux:

to engage the richness of their own communities and histories while struggling against structures of domination... to move in and out of different cultures, so as to appreciate and appropriate codes and vocabularies of diverse cultural traditions in order to further expand the knowledge, skills, and insights that will need to define and shape, rather than merely serve, in the modern world. [1992:246]

Appropriation for Giroux (1992) is possible through a pedagogy of difference that recognizes that the different voices students bring to the classroom are filled with contradictions. Part of these contradictions include those dominant discourses that students should challenge and appropriate in order to reshape their own knowledge, to fashion new hybrid identities and possibly change configurations of politics and power (Rodriguez-Brown & Mulherb,1993).

A second proposal is that in a pedagogy of difference, educators should promote weaving multiple literacies in the classroom. By adopting a broader vision of literacy as one that incorporates *reading the world*, it is possible to view literacies as transformative. Multiple and competing literacy practices point to notion that *becoming literate has more to do with reading the world than reading the word*. The challenges to literacy in reading the world are all the more urgent when constructing identity with children in a second language context. Through intervention at very initial stages of ESL, it is possible to engage in a pedagogy of inclusion by providing an environment where children are not silenced, where they can voice through the narratives (diorama), their histories (hat day) and their ways of learning (e.g. through collaborative practices and active involvement of the community) and claim a place. It is a significant way to make sense of their own experiences. Children and staff gain from these

experiences when included to inform and reshape school culture.

Finally, when literacy education supports dominant attitudes and discourses, this can only further marginalize students whose language and culture is different from the mainstream (Ernst Slavin, 1997). A pedagogy of difference that affirms home, community and school cultures reproduced through multiple literacies represents a significant challenge to teachers and students in a multicultural setting. Differences embedded in multiple literacies constitute a basis for [reading] critically with the view that literacy events are implicated in relations of power and that certain forms of knowledge get privileged over others. When teachers and students begin to recognize and to deconstruct those differences within socially and historically situated sites of power/knowledge, they engage in reflective and transformative practices. In this context teachers and students can appropriate school-based discourses not as a way to serve mainstream positions which reproduce marginalization and alienation in society but as a basis to engage in discourse practices that transform social inequities in the classroom, in the community and in the broader segments of society.

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ENDNOTES.

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1. All knowledge is situated and interested. Knowledge is situated when it is rooted socio-historically and politically. Interested knowledge refers to certain forms of knowledge that are privileged over others and dominate in a particular context. Knowledge represents an ideological position because it reflects the interests of certain groups.

2. Voice refers to discourse shaped by historically and culturally mediated experiences and situated in a universe of shared meanings of a particular community.

3. Muslim society is guided by Islam and the Koran. Male and female roles with obligations for each are clearly delineated (Khan, 1994). Young children are enculturated into a socialization process of gendered relations that influences their behaviour in the classroom.

4. In Western society, literacy has been traditionally defined as reading and writing and in opposition to oral discourse. The colonialist perspective labelled many non-Western societies as "illiterate" because of their oral traditions. However, in expanding the definition of literacy, we have to reexamine notions of literacy and literate behaviour. It is not a misnomer to speak of oral literacy. Oral literate traditions characterize many African communities (cf. Okpewho, 1992). This perspective stands in contrast to the one being suggested in technological societies. With the latter, many features of the written code have become part of oral language (e.g. use of precise vocabulary, exploiting varied syntactic resources, etc.). Literate ability, in this context, becomes a means of accessing and conveying information in meaningful acts of communication not only in the written but also in the oral mode (television, film, personal narratives in class, written reports, fax etc.).

Teaching Culture and Language in the Beginning Foreign Language Class: Four Strategies That Work. Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German, 4 Kramsch, C. (1993).⁴ Taylor and Sorenson briefly outline the theory behind culture capsules, and then describe several that they have used in multiple levels of Spanish courses. Significantly, the authors recommend that the instructor feel comfortable using the same capsule for varying levels of students, but that they add more detail as the proficiency level of the students increases.