

(In)Visible Literacies of Transnational Newcomer Youth in a Secondary English Classroom

Brooke Ward Taira
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Abstract

Research documents how transnational youth leverage literacy practices to maintain global connections, identity, and self-worth within learning environments that often fail to honor their cultural and linguistic repertoires. This article extends this research by focusing on the unique practices, experiences, and perspectives of secondary newcomer and refugee students. Grounded in transnational, sociocultural, and asset-based frameworks, this article highlights findings from a qualitative case study that explored the literacy practices of transnational students in a ninth-grade English classroom taught by a transnational teacher. Analysis of oral histories, classroom observations, and in-process interviews collected over a prolonged period revealed participants' numerous and varied literacy practices. These practices, however, remained mostly invisible in the school and classroom, surfacing when recruited for narrow curricular and academic purposes. This work offers implications for continued research into the practices of newcomer students and potential benefits of teacher education centered on critical inquiry as a means for creating empowering literacy classrooms that draw on students' assets, backgrounds, and repertoires to create more authentic and empowering spaces for literacy learning.

Keywords

Transnational newcomer youth; Refugee students; Secondary English; Literacy practices

Introduction

Recent attention to immigration and its impact on the lives of transnational youth encourages us to examine how migration and connection shape their lived experiences and participation in practices across borders. Transnational youth—those whose lives and networks span multiple nations—develop honed global understandings and engage in a range of social and cultural practices across borders (Skerrett, 2012). Among these practices, literacy plays a critical role in identity formation and issues of inclusion and access.

The centrality of literacy in and around people's lives is well-documented—the ways literacy can empower or regulate (Vieira, 2013), confer citizenship and personhood (Cornelius, 1991; Winn, 2010), and maintain global connections and cultural practices. Narratives, in particular, serve as a powerful tool for

historically marginalized peoples (Diniz-Pereira, 2013). Stories “humanize us,” Delgado (1989) notes, calling us to listen to the stories of individuals to better understand their lives and experiences. The present study of a secondary classroom of transnational newcomer students responds to calls to listen to learners themselves (Franzak, 2006; Grant, 2016) and attend to what they say about their own schooling and literacies in the hopes of generating opportunities for empowering learning. The study highlights student perspectives, paying close attention to ways students describe their learning, and in doing so, provides a valuable glimpse into the motivations and preferences of those who are the main recipients of our educational system, but are often silenced (Grant, 2016).

Though a growing body of research details transnational students' rich cultural repertoires, their agency as historical actors, and their

participation in literacies that span geographical boundaries (Compton-Lilly, 2008; Sanchez, 2007a, 2007b; Skerrett, 2015), studies have largely excluded the experiences of secondary students in classroom settings leaving them “overlooked and underserved” (Menken, 2013) by schools and by the research community. Scholars such as Sanchez (2014) also note the need to incorporate the unique experiences of newcomer and refugee students into the larger body of literature on transnational students. This study addresses these issues by incorporating the histories, perspectives, and voices of secondary newcomer students to illuminate how experiences of migration and transnational literacy practices shape classroom learning.

Review of the literature

Transnational students face a variety of challenges when navigating American schools, particularly in regards to their access to engaging and challenging curricula and resources, and their ability to participate fully in affirming and empowering educational experiences (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007; Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011). Deficit perspectives and subtractive processes contribute to their underachievement (Campano, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 2013; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1996) and lead to their disproportionate representation in under-resourced and under-funded schools (Noguera, 2004). Further, classrooms and schools often fail to incorporate transnational students’ cultural and linguistic repertoires into their learning (Purcell-Gates, 2013; Skerrett, 2015). Schools may even participate in the invalidation and erasure of students’ personal and home literacies (de la Piedra, 2010).

It is evident that transnational youth face substantial barriers in schools; however, a rich body of scholarship also reveals how these

students use literacy, both personally and socially, to affirm their own transnational identities and thrive academically (Compton-Lilly, 2008; Sanchez, 2007b). They may employ literacy practices to navigate home and school spaces (de la Piedra, 2010; Rubinstein-Avila, 2007), contexts that are often misaligned. Literacy practices become part of a collection of resources, honed by border-crossing and global movement that students use to cultivate a simultaneous belonging (Sanchez, 2007) or “in-between-ness” (Sarroub, 2005) across social spaces. Recent research also catalogues transnational students’ creation and deployment of multi-literacies—varied, hybrid literacy practices often used in unofficial contexts for social purposes (Skerrett, 2012, 2015; Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Existing scholarship on multi-literacies presents youth “as skillful and purposeful users of literacy” (Skerrett, 2015, p. 366) who employ knowledge of multiple contexts and cultural spaces to form sophisticated transnational understandings.

Such studies show how non-school literacies may inform the ways transnational students interact with schooling but do not always provide a complete picture of transnational students’ in-school experiences with literacy. Classroom studies of transnational students are rare, and a review of experimental literacy research for English Learners in the content areas conducted by Janzen (2008) indicates that these studies have been heavily influenced by cognitive theories of reading and literacy. Missing from these more individualistic cognitive studies, which are focused primarily on reading strategies and vocabulary practice, is an understanding of sociocultural perspectives that reveal social and interactional dimensions of literacy learning for transnational students.

Qualitative studies that employ sociocultural framings of transnational students’ in school literacy learning offer a means of capturing more

fully the complex nature of these practices. Existing classroom studies provide some valuable insight into the experiences of transnational students in literacy classrooms. Rubinstein-Avila (2007), for example, used portraiture to study how a transnational student's transition to life and high school in the United States changed her understanding of literacy and how her ELL designation limited her access to rigorous literacy curricula. Other studies noted the effects of school-based bilingual programs (Bartlett, 2008) or special out-of-school literacy programs (Gutierrez, 2008; Pacheco & Nao, 2009). These studies provide examples of empowering asset-based literacy instruction occurring mostly outside of the regular school curriculum. The study by Barlett (2009) uncovered how performance and achievement discourses within the school culture worked against asset-based approaches to teaching transnational students. A formative experiment by Ivey and Broaddus (2007), aimed at facilitating reading engagement among recently-immigrated native speakers of Spanish, highlighted the importance of understanding students' motivations for reading, as well as the lack of access many of these students had to engaging classroom texts.

Together, the above studies indicate that the personal, often self-initiated, literacy practices of transnational youth can help them create and maintain transnational identities and social connections, bolstering them against negative schooling experiences. These studies provide insight into how out-of-school practices might inform in-school literacy learning. Studies of transnational students' literacies in school environments provide some promising results, indicating that opportunities exist for transnational students to interact positively with literacy learning and education more generally. However, there are few examples of these positive experiences occurring in everyday

school settings and classrooms with standard secondary curricula. Although existing studies provide important information about literacy's potential to aid students in surviving and thriving in American schools, the current study pushes us to examine the actual classroom experiences of these students beyond technical aspects of language learning.

Transnational and sociocultural perspectives on migration and literacy

In order to attend to students' personal histories, cultural participation, and literacy practices, the study employed a layering of theoretical lenses to view global movement and how this movement shaped learning in a secondary literacy classroom. Transnationalism served as a foundational lens through which global migratory processes—especially participation in literacy and cultural practices that span geographical borders—were viewed as dynamic, ongoing, and multidirectional (Petron, 2009; Sanchez & Machado-Casas, 2009). Although scholars offer multiple definitions for transnationalism, as it is invoked in the present study, transnationalism was viewed as the ongoing, multidirectional movement, social participation, and/or communication between/among multiple nations and across national borders. This approach aligned theoretically with recent work by Lam and Warriner (2012), Leonard (2013), and Sanchez and Kasun (2012) by including maintenance of traditions and/or cultural practices from a country of origin as forms of transnationalism. Troubling easy and simple assumptions about immigration, transnationalism offered an expansive lens with which to view the richness and dynamicity of lives and social practices that cross borders (Sanchez & Kasun, 2012).

Sociocultural perspectives positioned both culture and literacy as embedded in individuals' participation in a collection of varied, hybrid and

social practices, and provided a critical lens through which to view power and individual agency (Gee, 2008; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Perry, 2012). Formerly understood and approached merely as a set of cognitive skills, literacy, from sociocultural and ideological viewpoints, is comprised of contextually situated social and cultural practices (Johnson & Cowles, 2013; Purcell-Gates, 2013). Viewing literacy as socially and culturally bound worked against understandings of literacy as a decontextualized and autonomous set of processes and skills (Purcell-Gates, 2013; Street, 1984). Sociocultural understandings of cultural practice moved the focus away from categorizing groups of people based on shared nativity and helped the study to position individuals as agents and socio-historical actors who transform and are transformed by their environments and interactions with others.

Layering transnational and sociocultural lenses not only helped shape an understanding of migration and its impact on cultural identity and literacy, but also provided a foundation on which to build and use asset-based frameworks that position transnational subjects and their communities as repositories of knowledge and experience (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Petron, 2009). With the emergence of sociocultural understandings of literacy have come more expansive understandings of how literacy enables and acts on individuals and the ways individuals, reciprocally, act on literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) in both local and global contexts. Transnational literacy studies explore how globalization impacts individuals' access to literacy, and critically examine how literacy can undermine or reinforce inequality (Blommaert, 2008; Jiminez, Smith, & Teague, 2009). As employed in this study, transnational literacies encompassed more than solely reading and writing by including a spectrum of literacy practices that enabled transnational youth to

establish and maintain social connections and achieve both personal and academic goals (Skerrett, 2012). Doing so allowed for a more complete representation of students' communicative repertoires and helped reveal how privileging written practices might obscure the centrality of spoken and visual literacies.

Driven by these theoretical frameworks and the spaces that existing research leaves for deeper inquiry into the experiences and literacy practices of transnational students, this study explored the following questions:

- What are the literacy practices of a transnational teacher and her students in a secondary literacy classroom?
- How do teacher and student perceptions of experiences and histories of movement and participation help to shape these practices?

Method

This article draws from a qualitative case study of a classroom where a transnational teacher and her students engaged in literacy practices that were potentially informed by their own histories of transnational migration and participation in transnational practices. Though the teacher played a significant role in the study, this article focuses predominately on student perspectives regarding their rich and varied but often (in)visible practices—those that were surfaced and strategically recruited for curricular purposes, but otherwise obscured by their schooling and curriculum.

Study Design

I employed a case study approach to explore the social enactment of phenomena (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Compton-Lilly, 2013)—in this instance, transnational literacy practices—within a localized and contextualized case—a secondary English classroom in a school for newcomer students. The study employed a sociocultural, asset-based lens that directed the focus of

inquiry toward literacy practices as they were socially enacted in the classroom. Emphasizing the context in which literacy practices occurred provided deep and nuanced contextualization while also enabling a zoomed-in view of day-to-day literacy practices over time.

Study context

The study took place in a ninth-grade classroom at Piedmont School, a school for newcomers located in a rapidly growing diverse metropolitan center in the Southeastern United States. In proximity to state-administered and faith-based refugee assistance and resettlement programs, Piedmont School served a population comprised entirely of newcomer transnational students, many of them refugees, in grades 3 through 12. The majority of students who attended the school at the time of the study as a result of immigration came predominately from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico. Refugee students who attended the school had arrived most recently from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Togo. Many of these students had experienced interrupted education.

Students attended Piedmont on an elective basis with the requirement that it must be their first year in American schools and English could not be their first language. Students could attend the school for one year before transitioning to their district-assigned neighborhood school. At the time of the study, the school had 272 students enrolled. Of these students, 48% were refugees and 52% had immigrated for other reasons. Within the school, 70 students were in elementary grades, 75 students were in middle school, and 122 students were in high school. The student population represented 45 countries and 39 languages. Refugee resettlement created challenges for Piedmont as new students arrived at the school continuously throughout the year, but the school maintained ongoing connections to community organizations in order to provide

support not only for the students who attended, but for their families as well.

Participants

Participants in the study included Ms. Nelson, a transnational ninth-grade English teacher, and twelve students in her 3rd period English I class. Ms. Nelson was born in Sydney, Australia to parents who had themselves emigrated from India. She received a degree in teaching and certification to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) from Sydney University. She taught ESL for five years in Australia in a school that served a large population of English Language Learners before moving with her husband to the United States in 1999 with the Visiting International Faculty (VIF) program.

The students in Ms. Nelson's 3rd period classroom—a little over half of whom agreed to participate—were from a variety of countries, but the majority of students had recently emigrated from the Middle East and Africa and students ranged in age from 15 to 18 years old. The study included oral history interviews with all participants, and these oral histories provided demographic information that informed classroom observations and semi-structured interviews regarding literacy learning and classroom interactions (see **Table 1**). Of the twelve students who entered the study, only Cassandra exited early due to family relocation.

Instructional context

As a school that served students in grades 3-12 and included varying class schedules based on grade level, Piedmont operated without bells. Classes in the high school were on a block schedule of four 90-minute periods per day. Although Ms. Nelson's lessons differed from day to day, there were some common features of class instruction and general categories of activities that remained constant throughout the semester. A typical day included a warm-up, direct instruction, reading, and an independent assignment. At times, a writing assignment

would take the place of reading, and these writing assignments most often took the form of expository or persuasive essays. As the semester progressed, more of Ms. Nelson's class time became devoted to structured test preparation that included the reading of articles and short stories or essays and answering of multiple-choice questions.

The most commonly used texts in Ms. Nelson's classroom were printed handouts of poems, essays, articles, and brief works of fiction with accompanying questions. During the semester, students read speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln, poems by Edgar Allen Poe, and a variety of nonfiction essays and articles (all provided as handouts). Longer works studied in class included *Romeo and Juliet*, provided as a bound book that included modern-day translations, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, printed as chapter summaries and given to students as packets.

Data sources

Viewing the classroom as a dynamic social system, I was intentional in collecting a variety of rich data sources to adequately capture its complexity (Lee, 2012) and generate nuanced understandings of the individuals that made up the class community, their backgrounds and practices, and the processes that permeated the classroom. Data sources included oral history, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, written narratives, and classroom artifacts. Rather than being used in isolation, these tools purposefully informed each other as means of capturing in-process literacy practices and interactions between the students themselves and between students and teacher.

Observations. I observed the classroom 3-4 times per week for a semester, creating fieldnotes and post-observation analytic memos. Although I primarily conducted classroom observations, I also accompanied the teacher and students to lunch and talked with students

during practices for International Night (an annual school-wide student art, music, and dance program) and at the final performance. These extracurricular observations informed the zoomed-in daily instructional observations and provided a broader understanding of students' practices, interests, and social circles. While conducting observations, I noted general classroom events, as well as specific areas of focus such as interpersonal interactions and literacy practices that included, but were not limited to, the reading of curricular and personal texts, storytelling, writing, and class discussions.

Oral History. Inclusion of oral history interviews as part of this case study was based in the belief that personal narrative can deepen our understanding of ourselves and others (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Oral history interviews with participants began the very first week of data collection, and questions centered on histories of movement and experiences of personal and family literacy practices (e.g. How would you describe yourself and your family? Could you describe the place where you grew up? What traditions are important to your family? What kinds of things do people in your family like to read/write/talk about?).

These interviews were transcribed and coded. The oral history interviews served several purposes: first, the oral histories helped me to understand the ways that students perceived their literacy histories, their participation in transnational practices, and when relevant, their own histories of transnational movement. Additionally, the oral histories encouraged the collection of rich and meaningful data during participant observation and periodic semi-structured interviews with students and the teacher.

Student and teacher interviews. In addition to the oral history interviews, I conducted periodic semi-structured interviews with the

teacher and students. Focused on the ongoing processes within the classroom, I sought to understand how classroom community members understood their own participation in literacy practices and the ways they believed their perceptions of migration and/or transnational identity might have shaped these practices. The teacher interview protocol and student interview inquired into the ways that the teacher and students engaged in literacy practices individually and socially (e.g. If I asked you to describe the kinds of activities you do in your English class, what would you say? What do you find most meaningful or interesting about English class? What do you read/write in your English class? Could you tell me more about what you read/discussed/wrote in class today?).

I conducted two extended scheduled interviews with Ms. Nelson and two scheduled semi-structured interviews with each student who participated in the study. I also held informal conversations with teacher and students throughout the semester, both in class and in extracurricular settings such as international night or during class changes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Student Narratives and Products. I looked for opportunities to observe student narratives—both oral and written—that might reveal the “experiences of migrant students, their families, and their communities [as well as] the social, cultural, political, and historical particulars of their everyday life” (Pacheco & Nao, 2009, p. 35). Although I found that the curriculum did not provide opportunities for a wide range of student narratives, I did collect student writing samples and sought opportunities to talk with students about personal narratives they had created in written or digital form. I also took photos of student work samples and documented written or visual projects that students shared with me, such as a biographical narrative personally given to me by Moussina, a

student from Togo, or an art project that Ema, a student from the Dominican Republic, wanted to show me between classes.

Classroom and curricular artifacts. In addition to students’ written narratives and classwork, I collected classroom artifacts that appeared pertinent to the study of classroom culture, curriculum, and literacy teaching and learning, but were not actual examples of student work. Ms. Nelson provided me with a digital copy of the pacing guide for English I and permitted me to take photos of artwork or informational posters in her classroom. I also collected artifacts outside of classroom that I thought might inform my inquiry and provide a means of triangulation of data during analysis. These artifacts included photographs of the school, particularly the artwork and messages present in the hallways and cafeteria, as these visuals had the potential to provide insight into the school culture and the messages the school intended for students and parents. I also collected photographs of student artifacts such as student display boards for international night, student generated projects, and artwork that were relevant to the study.

Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three stages and primarily involved inductive analyses of interview and observation data. Because this study sought to understand ongoing processes in the English classroom, I employed constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) throughout data collection and analyses occurred during and after data collection. Data analysis, presented here in a linear fashion, was in practice an ongoing, iterative, and cyclical process.

The first phase of analysis occurred during data collection and involved initial pre-coding of data followed by descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) of fieldnotes and oral history interviews. In this first phase, I compared the oral history

data to the theoretical and research perspectives that guided my research questions in order to generate preliminary axial codes that would inform subsequent analyses of semi-structured interviews and observational data. I read through the oral histories multiple times to capture the essence of passages or the topic of larger chunks of data and established initial descriptive codes (e.g. migration, cross-border connections, home vs. adopted country). I then generated subcodes from the broader descriptive code of “migration” that included migration: feelings, migration: reasons, plans for continued migration, ending/receiving contexts, USA: reactions to, and feelings about community. In this first phase, I also compared the oral history data to the theoretical and research perspectives that guided my research questions in order to generate preliminary axial codes that would inform subsequent analyses of semi-structured interviews and classroom observational data (see **Table 2**).

The second phase of analysis began after analysis of the oral histories was complete and continued during and after the collection of classroom observation data and ongoing semi-structured interviews. This phase incorporated all verbal data as well as observational fieldnotes. In this phase, I repeated the process of pre-coding employed in phase one during initial readings of the student and teacher interviews. I reviewed codes for the oral history interviews as these initial codes were intended to inform analysis of ongoing semi-structured interviews.

After reviewing the data gleaned from the oral histories, I read through each student’s collection of semi-structured interviews twice to get a sense of each student’s experiences across the semester before moving on to the next collection. I then engaged in line-by-line coding of interview and observational data to generate grounded descriptive codes (Corbin & Strauss,

1990) as well as emerging axial codes. Although analysis of the oral history interviews informed phase two analysis of observation and ongoing interview data, the semi-structured interviews provided new information that prompted me, at times, to return to the oral history data and refine initial codes. For example, in interviews with students, the *in vivo* code “making a good future” emerged in relation to students’ understandings of motivation and impetus for migration, and this code was combined under the meta-code of “migration.”

The third phase of coding began when data collection was complete. I revisited all data sources including oral histories, semi-structured interviews, fieldnotes, and student artifacts, and engaged in second cycle coding where I refined existing codes—grouping, shifting, collapsing, and expanding these codes. In phase three, I also searched across all data sources for patterns, and these patterns were examined and organized according to frequency, correspondence, and substance. From these patterns and using theoretical and empirical literature as a guide, I generated inductive categories, noting their relationships and defining features.

During this final phase, I incorporated measures to help ensure validity (Creswell, 2007). Data sources such as photographs of the classroom, student projects and curricular documents served as confirming (or disconfirming) evidence for categories generated in the third phase of data analysis. As the sole researcher in this study, I relied on multiple purposeful data sources to as a means of triangulation. The extensive time spent with participants also created opportunities to revisit the data in cooperation and conversation with participants (Creswell, 2007) and enabled me to seek continual clarification in the hopes of fully capturing their stories and experiences.

Findings

Research has elucidated transnational students' uses of literacy across home, community, and school spaces and how these students' unofficial and vernacular literacies inform in-school learning and participation (de la Piedra, 2010; Skerrett, 2012; Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Congruent with studies that catalogue the literate repertoires of transnational youth, students in this ninth-grade classroom engaged in literacy practices that spanned global contexts. These practices, however, often disappeared in the context of their school and the classroom. As a newcomer school, Piedmont was uniquely positioned to support multilingual newcomer students and to provide possibilities for affirming and empowering educational experiences. However, directing attention towards student perspectives on their own literacies and literacy learning revealed how these practices strategically emerged/disappeared and were recruited by the school and teacher to serve curricular and academic goals aligned with standardized instruction.

Students' transnational literacies

Oral histories with students revealed their participation in a range of literacy practices—personal, social, familial, and cultural—outside of the school day. Tahmineh, a 16-year-old student from Iran who spoke both Persian and English, maintained communication with friends and family in Iran and engaged in a variety of cultural and literacy practices with her family. Tahmineh read widely outside of school and enjoyed hearing her mother tell “famous stories from the Shamenah, stories everyone knew in Iran.”

Myat, age 15, migrated with his mother and siblings from a refugee camp in Thailand where he had lived since the age of 5. Myat spoke Burmese and was learning English, and though

he rarely spoke in English class, he was a talented musician and performed a song in Burmese at the school's International Night. Music was a central aspect of his family life: “My family, when we are together, we sing...together, play guitar together.” Like Tahmineh's family, Myat's family engaged in a variety of personal and communicative practices that were informed by and spanned transnational contexts.

Randa, a student who moved from Iraq to the United States, enjoyed authoring narratives for transnational audiences. Randa was sometimes quiet in class, but she enjoyed writing “true stories” online and used Instagram as a forum for writing to and about friends in Iraq: “I have a friend on Instagram. I asked if she would give me permission to write about her. She has more happening in her life and I write stories about her life in Arabic.” Friends and followers in Iraq served as her audience, and Instagram provided a social space where she could share writing in her own language and communicate with friends from home.

In addition to writing in more public spaces, students also wrote purely for themselves. Moussina, from Togo, wrote about herself and her home country. Ema, a vocal student from the Dominican Republic, wrote stories and poetry in Spanish, but rarely shared them. She kept her stories and poems private, explaining, “It's hard to show people that kind of thing because it's so personal.”

Students also read outside of school in their home languages and in English. Po, for example, liked to read fantasy novels, and Zaki enjoyed comic books and books about sports. Myat, in addition to playing music, read texts about mysticism and astrology given to him by his mother and, having left Myanmar to live in a refugee camp, also liked to read histories and stories of his home country: “I read astrology things...I like to study history and what happened. Burma has an interesting history with

different kingdoms. Many stories and legends.” Although students like Myat and Moussina often seemed disinterested in school reading and writing, literacy practices like these, often carried with them from their home countries, potentially enabled connections to their homes, friends, and families while acclimating to life in the United States.

In contrast to these personally meaningful literacy practices, students generally reported their experiences with literacy in schools as impersonal, academic learning situated around standards and academic texts. Students employed personal literacy practices almost entirely and exclusively in non-school spaces, and although not every student claimed to read outside of class or to write stories or personal narratives, their personal literacies spoke to their backgrounds, beliefs, and interests. The literacies that students employed, often for social purposes, provided a means of viewing and understanding what students *did* as purposeful users of literacy outside of the classroom. Conversations with students revealed personal literacies that neither emerged frequently nor were invoked by teachers as a means to enhance in-class literacy learning. This is despite how research documents that students from historically marginalized backgrounds benefit from the incorporating and valuing of their non-school literacies into schooling practices (Franzak, 2006).

(In)visibility of students’ cultural and literacy practices

Although these students clearly possessed transnational understandings and had lives that included participation in rich and varied literacies, these personal practices were rarely visible in the school and classroom, and only surfaced when strategically sought out by the school and teacher to further academic goals. Although culture mostly disappeared at the classroom level, efforts to recognize students’

cultural and linguistic backgrounds did exist at the school level. Unfortunately, these efforts often took on celebratory and essentializing qualities that failed to capture the complexity of students’ actual lives and practices. School-wide efforts to provide a supportive and welcoming school culture were evident, but a unifying feature of both the school and English I classroom were missed opportunities to empower students and use their experiences and backgrounds to expand their learning.

Students shared that the school was a space for them to build relationships with their peers. Ema indicated that students at Piedmont benefitted from the diversity of its population and the perception that students there shared similar experiences: “What I love about this school is everybody is different and no one is talking about you or judging you cause we all have the same problems...I really love that.” Myat explained: “I love all the students, the way they treat each other. We don’t feel like strangers.”

As a safe and welcoming environment, the school played an important role in supporting student’s acclimation and development of social networks. However, attention to students’ practices often appeared superficial and disconnected from learning, taking the form of cultural celebration. This celebration was visible in subtle ways, such as the artwork displayed in the hallways. Very few examples of student writing, artwork, or self-representations hung in the school. The art room—shown to me by Ema, a young artist herself—was filled with shelves of student artwork, but the school walls bore only murals of the world, of countries and their flags, or of young people from various countries in traditional dress. This artwork, presumably meant to represent the diversity of the school, seemed to make the actual backgrounds of the students, their practices, or their own artistic creations less visible.

International Night (I-Night), a program of student performances held in December, seemed to embody the complexities and tensions of cultural representation and visibility present in the school. I-Night was a popular school tradition at Piedmont, one that brought families and community together to celebrate cultures represented in the school. Student performers collaborated on musical presentations or dances. As Randa described, “each person is dancing or singing from their country.” Students who chose not to perform created display boards and flags for their home countries and presented them before the performances.

A conversation with Tahmineh, however, revealed underlying complexities: Although she moved from Iran and spoke Persian at home with her family, she was grouped to sing with Randa, a student from Iraq whose home language was Arabic. When asked if she spoke or understood Arabic, she said, “No, I just memorized it. I know the meaning of the song because I searched [the meaning] and found it and memorized it.” She shared that her teachers had encouraged her to join the Arabic-speaking students so that she would be able to perform.

The fact that Tahmineh’s participation was not a reflection of her own background or cultural practice seemed to indicate the prioritizing of cultural celebration over intentional efforts to create inclusive educational spaces, ones that might encourage student self-representation. The large group performances seemed to further indicate this possibility. Students from Togo, Kenya, and Eritrea were grouped into “African Dance” and Latinx students from various countries performed “Latino Modern Dance.” The tendency to amalgamate cultural experiences into pan-ethnic representations seemed to confirm a disconnect between the school’s attempts to honor student cultures and the students’ actual lived experiences. Efforts to create a positive and

inclusive image for the school left little space for visible and authentic incorporation of students’ cultural knowledge and experiences.

Strategic visibility of student literacies: culture as curricular

Although Piedmont, as a school, made efforts to create a welcoming climate for the students, the absence of meaningful attention to students’ diverse backgrounds also revealed itself in the classroom. Observations of Ms. Nelson’s class revealed a lack of focus on students’ transnational lives and personal goals outside of the curriculum. Although the class consisted entirely of recently immigrated and emergent bilingual students, the classroom looked, in many ways, much like other regular high school English classrooms. Additionally, classroom activities mirrored those of a typical 9th grade course—students recorded literary terms and academic vocabulary in notebooks and read and analyzed canonical texts commonly associated with ninth grade English (Lewis & Dockter, 2011).

Consistent with research on the school experiences of other transnational students, the students in this classroom experienced predominately monolingual, monocultural texts, and a ninth-grade curriculum anchored to the Common Core State Standards and canonical works of literature. Their funds of knowledge and global experiences and understandings were rarely viewed as resources for teaching and learning, and these students had limited access to personally relevant and engaging texts, a well-documented phenomenon in literacy research with transnational students (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007; Lewis & Dockter, 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al, 2011).

One of Ms. Nelson’s attempts to establish connections with students via instruction occurred at the start of school year when she had students write a brief autobiographical narrative in the hopes of getting to know them “through

their writing.” These student narratives, she indicated, helped her “find out a lot about their background, their family situation, things like that.” Within these narratives students described their countries, families, interests, and in some cases, what they liked about their home countries and/or what they liked about America. Although these narratives provided Ms. Nelson with some initial biographical information about students, this was the only assignment observed or mentioned in interviews where students had the chance to write about themselves and their interests. When asked if they had opportunities to write about themselves, students referenced this one assignment, or simply said “no.”

Although Ms. Nelson started the semester with the seeming intention of learning more about her students through narrative writing, subsequent opportunities to connect daily instruction to students’ lived experiences and interests were rare occurrences, and when incorporated, seemed to be used as instructional tools or resources to reinforce curricular goals. Ms. Nelson shared, “I want the kids to share what they know, their background knowledge, their own experiences, so that they can connect it to the text when we start reading,” a reflection that tied the value of student experiences and understandings to the potential for these experiences to help students understand texts and cover standards in English I. Thus, the utility of incorporating students’ experiences and knowledge lay in helping them to address writing standards for English I. This is a goal that differed from the more emancipatory forms of literacy that scholars such as Pacheco & Nao (2009) posited might enable students to articulate identities, reinterpret identities, and/or interrogate social power structures.

Attempts to draw on students’ backgrounds as a means to achieve curricular goals in English were mostly ineffective. For instance, during a lesson on “Hussar Song,” a poem about a young

soldier who leaves home to fight in a war, students were asked to share what they knew about leaving home and leaving family for an unfamiliar place. Students were compliant, but their responses were brief. Cassandra, for example, commented that she had to leave her mother and sister in Mexico when she came to America, but did not elaborate. Prompted by a poem that seemed to have little personal relevance, students appeared disinterested. Students knew much about the topic, however, and told me about their experiences in our interviews. Cassandra, for example, shared her feelings about living without her mother:

My father decided to come to the United States and he brought me and wants me to learn English. It’s important because in Mexico the school is no good...Here sometimes I’m happy, sometimes sad because my mother isn’t here. Only my father.

Similarly, Myat’s family had to move away from Thailand, leaving his father behind: “My father is in a refugee camp in Thailand. He is in the army, so he can’t come here. Almost every night my father and my sister have a conversation.” Randa, too, had family still in Iraq, and said, “I was sad [to move] because I miss my nephews and niece.” Mari, too, shared, “I miss my family back in Pakistan—my grandmother and my aunt and my cousins—I miss them.”

Shoko conveyed additional complexities of transnational migration and the factors that influenced her family’s move to America:

I like being here. Sometimes I can say I miss my country but here you have to come and learn new things and get a good education. Sometimes I miss my friends...like here, no friends. My friends and sometimes I miss my religion... many things.

It was evident from interviews that students were willing to speak about their experiences of immigrating to the United States in the context of authentic conversations, but were not

prompted to do so when their experiences were sought out for more contrived and curricular purposes. Further, curricular texts were the central focus of meaning making and were not incorporated with the intention of bringing student perspectives and experiences to the surface. Ms. Nelson's focus on curricular goals may have limited, rather than generated opportunities, for students to co-create meaning and learning experiences in the classroom with Ms. Nelson and with each other. Although research suggests that conventional, monologic, and largely decontextualized English classes such as Ms. Nelson's are not rare (Yagelski, 2005), nor are they particularly beneficial for any student. The traditional and standardized structure of her classroom seemed particularly limiting for transnational students who, research also suggests, might have benefitted much more from responsive and relevant instruction.

At the classroom level, attention to culture and incorporation of diverse texts and perspectives were seen as peripheral to a standardized curriculum, an issue prevalent in classrooms and school systems across the country (Davis & Willson, 2015; Skerrett & Hargreaves, 2008; Sleeter, 2011), but surprising in a school specifically designed to support newcomer and refugee students. Additionally, in both the school and classroom, cultural knowledge and experiences were often separated from academic instruction (Sleeter, 2011) and only rarely was cultural knowledge used to create more meaningful learning experiences.

Discussion

Overall, findings that emerged from the study indicated that the students at Piedmont used literacy practices outside of English class to participate in transnational communication, engage in identity negotiation and maintenance, to author narratives, and to navigate school and community spaces. In addition to revealing

students' participation in literacy practices beyond the classroom, oral history and interview data revealed the assets that students brought to the classroom via their multilingual resources and abilities and transnational knowledge and experience. Beyond more superficial celebration, these students' understandings, experiences, and resources were rarely recognized nor drawn upon for learning. When strategically made visible, students' cultural practices and literacies were recruited for specific and often narrow curricular goals, preventing efforts to interact with students as whole beings with experiences, interests, and socio-emotional needs.

A unique contribution of this study was its incorporation of classroom-based research to investigate how asset-based teaching that draws on students' backgrounds and experiences might shape the literacy learning of transnational newcomer students. Findings indicated that academic literacy practices aligned to curricular goals ultimately took precedence over what students personally did with literacy in out-of-school spaces. Although the masking of students' cultural, language, and literacy practices in traditional academic spaces has been documented (de la Piedra, 2010; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Skerrett, 2015), this was a surprising finding in a school designed especially for newcomers.

Rubenstein-Avila (2007) in her study of a transnational student transitioning to an American high school, points out how literacy practices can be used by transnational students to negotiate these transitions as well as the overall process of immigration. Scholars also indicate the potential for transnational teachers to support transformative education and for the possibilities empowering forms of literacy learning might provide for transnational students. When recognized and used as assets, transnational understandings, literacies, and ways of being can work against deficit

narratives, allowing students to articulate new and hybrid identities (Machaco-Casas, 2009; Pacheco & Nao, 2009). The English I classroom in this study, however, rarely supported this articulation in ways that transcended curricular goals and academic achievement. As a result, students participated in classroom discourses that were limited and *limiting* in their ability to recognize and draw on their full cultural and literate repertoires. By examining the literacy practices and transnational histories of Ms. Nelson and her students in both school and non-school spaces, this study illuminated a spectrum of literacy practices that spanned transnational contexts. Although it was evident that these practices existed and were central and meaningful aspects of students' lives, these practices disappeared in the context of schooling. The power that these practices might have had on literacy learning, as indicated by scholars such as Rubinstein-Avila (2009), was minimized by potentially more powerful and pervasive discourses of standardization and academic achievement. Ultimately, classroom and school literacies overshadowed students' out-of-school literacies.

The experiences of students in this study complicate what we, as teachers and researchers, currently know and assume about transnational students. Researchers have suggested that schools and teachers enlist the out-of-school literacy practices of transnational students for the aid of in-school learning and academics. Few studies have addressed what then happens in school for these students and the extent to which incorporation of their backgrounds and experiences enables expansive learning opportunities or simply acts as a mechanism for attending to existing curricula. The findings of this study, in part, reorient our focus from improving transnational students' ability to *do* American school to rethinking what our goals as

an educational community are for these students.

Implications

Research would suggest that Piedmont, a school devoted exclusively to newly immigrated students, might be a generative space with a learning environment that would honor students' backgrounds, draw on their various understandings and ways of knowing, and have a positive impact on their literacy learning. However, findings overwhelmingly suggested divides between theory, research, and classroom realities. This may be due, in part, to a lack of classroom research with transnational students and teachers. Studies have documented students' out-of-school literacies and how these literacies might potentially be drawn upon to aid students in accessing academic literacies, but future research might also look into classrooms to see how these literacies are ignored or taken up and what the goals of doing so might be for students themselves. Findings from the present study indicated that, on rare occasions when cultural knowledge or experience was made visible, these assets were resources for accessing the curriculum and furthering achievement discourses. This finding indicates a need for continued classroom research on the benefits of attending to transnational students' literacies, or incorporating their funds of knowledge into literacy instruction generally. Specifically, there is a need to clearly understand and articulate the goals of schools and the research community for these students, including how these goals are enacted or addressed in the contexts of schooling.

In addition to a need for more classroom studies of transnational studies, future research might also consider the range of needs and experiences that characterize transnational students' lives in order to add nuance to what we know about them. Ms. Nelson's classroom was

perhaps uncommon in its inclusion of only newcomer and refugee students, but this study highlights their unique needs and the potential ways schools and teachers respond to those needs. Studies of transnational students have largely neglected the experiences of newcomer students, focusing instead on students highly proficient in English (Jimenez & Gamez, 1996), second-generation transnational students (Lopez, 2003), students who migrated but have spent several years in American schools (Rubinstein-Avila, 2009), or transnational students born in America who regularly traverse transnational boundaries (Sanchez, 2007). In addition to current research on refugee students such as that of Nykiel-Herbert (2010), additional inquiry into the unique experiences of refugee students might also provide nuance to current understandings of transnationalism and schooling.

The study also points to potential benefits of teacher education centered on critical inquiry as a means for creating empowering literacy classrooms that draw on students' assets, backgrounds, and repertoires to create more authentic and empowering spaces for literacy learning. Franzak (2006) suggests that teachers become "active examiners of the social, political, and economic contexts in which they teach" (p. 236). Doing so will require that teachers actively interrogate their belief systems and their instructional approaches and should "actively promote critical inquiry into the dominance of some literacy values of others" (Franzak, 2006, p. 236). Districts and schools often provide opportunities for teachers to grow personally and professionally, but might be encouraged to tailor this growth to aspects of teaching not explicitly aligned with curricular goals. Opportunities could be included for critical inquiry into potential deficit framings of students and issues of power, inclusion, and access, as well as multicultural and culturally

responsive forms of teaching. As districts and schools consider how to best support their teachers, findings suggest that implementing professional development opportunities that support the teaching of diverse and multilingual students might potentially have profound impacts on teaching and learning.

This study of the literacy practices of a classroom of transnational students provides new perspectives that contribute to a body of research cataloguing the life experiences, histories of migration, and literacy practices of transnational students and teachers. Findings from this study corroborate, expand, and challenge existing theoretical assumptions regarding the teaching of transnational students, encouraging scholars to continue to examine and reimagine literacy learning that not only draws on the transnational repertoires of students, but also expands learning beyond the constraints of standards and curricula. Doing so presents possibilities for more inclusive and empowering literacy learning for transnational students.

Tables*Table 1: Participant Demographics*

Participant Name	Participant Age	Country of Origin	Languages Spoken
Cassandra	15	Mexico	Spanish, English
Ema	16	Dominican Republic	Spanish, English
Mari	17	Pakistan	Hindko, Urdu, English
Mika	16	Thailand	Thai, English
Moussina	18	Togo	Togolese, Ewe, English
Myat	15	Myanmar	Burmese, English
Po	16	Azerbaijan	Azerbaijani, Russian, English
Randa	18	Iraq	Arabic, English
Sara	16	Mexico	Spanish, English
Shoko	18	Togo	Togolese, French, English, Dutch
Tahmineh	16	Iran	Persian, English
Zaki	16	Kenya	Somali, Arabic, Swahili, English

Table 2: Examples of Phase 1 Descriptive Codes

Example Descriptive Code	Example Data Segment from Oral Histories
Home Country vs. Adopted Country (Initial Descriptive Code)	<p>“Between here and Kenya, it’s very different here.” (Zaki)</p> <p>“My home is not quite city. Many buildings. No clean air. No fresh air. Big traffic. Here, there is really fresh air. Nice, like, how do you say, nice environment? Everything is green and clean.” (Po)</p> <p>“Compared to my home (Dominican Republic), it’s so boring here. You can see nobody out. Everybody’s inside the house. It’s so boring and you just see trees. So boring.” (Ema)</p>
Family practices in America don't “Social Practices”	<p>“Here, we have a routine where every Sunday we watch Like a rule. Sunday movies...Because we are together. We see the movie if someone is not there.” (Sara)</p> <p>“We cook and like we did but here is a new life. Every morning my mother, brother, and sister go to a job. I go back home at 5 o'clock. Then it's time to eat dinner and we eat together and then we talk. It's important that we eat dinner together and talk and it makes me happy” (Mari)</p>
Transnational Communication (Axial Code)	<p>“My friends and family, in Togo, I call my them on Skype, on WhatsApp, every week or maybe sometimes if I have time or if I have money to buy the credits...and I write on Facebook and email my friends and sometimes my teachers.” (Shoko)</p> <p>“My grandmother and grandfather are in Kenya. We talk to them...my mother, every month, she gives money to them.” (Zaki)</p>

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About the Author

Brooke Ward Taira is an assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.