

Khmer rap boys, X-Men, Asia's fruits, and Dragonball Z: Creating multilingual and multimodal classroom contexts

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Inquiry-based projects can support students' literacy and language practices, create supportive classroom environments, and provide an avenue for teachers to learn more about the social worlds of their students.

"Students are filled with hopes and dreams, and also questions and wonders. What each of our students carries with him or her should be the resource for our teaching as well as the starting point of the students' learning" (Fu, 1995, p. 207).

While facilitating my students' work on inquiry-based projects, I was amazed by their engagement and enthusiasm. In one corner of my classroom, a group of boys discussed in Fuzhounese how to design their project on the X-Men. Across the room a group of girls reminisced in Vietnamese about their favorite fruits, which they cannot find in the United States. Other groups of Cambodian students worked in English on the history of rap and the story of Dragonball Z. These inquiry projects designed by my sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students revealed to me the diversity and complexities of their literacy and language practices. Inherently, these students'

projects represented the multilingual, multicultural, and multimodal nature of their social worlds.

Current trends in education, however, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), do not address the diversity or complexities of our students' literacy and language practices. Instead, they assert powerful monolingual and monocultural ethos. Focus is often placed on the acquisition of English literacy and the students' abilities to comprehend meanings that are based in the dominant culture—with no acknowledgment of the social or cultural basis of these practices. Thus, school literacy practices solidify cultural boundaries because they do not often reflect or respond to the many ways in which youth use reading, writing, and language.

In this article, literacy is approached from the perspective presented by Neuman and Rao (2004) who stated that for adolescent youth in particular, "effective literacy learning involves engaging with and creating a range of texts building on the languages, experiences, cultures, and other assets of students and communicating and expressing understanding in multiple ways, both independently and with others" (p. 7).

This article examines inquiry-based projects—projects that focus on the interests of

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the students through the lens of these newer views of literacy. The perspective presented in this article is an outcome of a dialogic process among my experiences as a middle school teacher for more than 12 years in urban areas of California and Pennsylvania, my own research (a five-year longitudinal ethnographic study with Khmer American children of migrant farm workers), and the literature in the area of multilingual and multimodal literacy practices. I align my beliefs with other researchers who discuss the importance of considering the social worlds of our students (Igoa, 1995; Moll, 2001; Perez, 2004). I suggest that the students' social worlds are multilingual and multimodal. Because of this, it is important to open up the monolingual and one-dimensional nature of our curricula by drawing on the multilingual and multimodal nature of the students' literacy and language practices. I present examples of inquiry-based projects as one type of pedagogical practice that can support students' literacy and language practices, create supportive classroom environments, and provide an avenue for teachers to learn more about the social worlds of their students.

Why multilingual and multimodal literacy practices?

Just as there are multiple paths to literacy learning (Goodman, 1997), there are multiple paths to the acquisition of second-language literacy learning (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000). The ways that students use reading and writing and socially interact around texts in particular practices are connected to broader social, cultural, and global contexts (New London Group, 2000). Therefore, as discussed by Martin-Jones and Jones, the term *multilingual* most accurately describes the multiplicity of students' literacy and language uses. Students enter the middle school classroom having had a wide range of experiences with multilingual literacies. Within their daily lives, they interact with different languages, language varieties, and scripts. For example, as the titles of the

students' inquiry projects demonstrate, the Fuzhounese-speaking boys interacted around Japanese anime texts. In their Saturday Chinese-language class, however, they learned to speak a second dialect of Chinese—Cantonese. My Khmer-speaking students, some who spoke Thai as a second language, encountered and used the English spoken in their urban neighborhoods while doing research on a text written in standard English. In their homes they rented Chinese movies that are dubbed into Khmer. Each group of students moved across different scripts or writing systems in their homes and communities, and each student was a multilingual individual.

In addition to the variety of language and literacy uses, Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) argued that the term *multilingual* also more accurately describes how every person has a different level of expertise in the languages they encounter. During my experience as a middle school teacher whose dominant language is English, I found that when students enter the classroom they each have different levels of expertise in a wide range of languages. There are students who have not had the opportunity to acquire formal literacy in the language of their cultural inheritance because of the lack of provision in U.S. schools. For example, some of the Khmer-speaking students I taught were born in Thai refugee camps and moved to the United States at very young ages. The schools in the United States never provided literacy classes in their Khmer language. They were expected to learn English and to learn in English. There are others who had some formal schooling in their home country but have had little or no access to formal schooling in English. At the same time, there are students who haven't had the opportunity for consistent schooling in their cultural inheritance or in English. Some students came to my classroom from El Salvador. Their education was disrupted because of the political upheavals in their home country. They began school here at 10 or 11 years of age. Yet, all of these students have experienced literacy and language practices in the contexts of their world (Perez, 2004). These are rich and varied

literacy and language experiences that are embedded in the students' social and cultural practices.

Within the multilingual social worlds of our students, modalities are also becoming increasingly integrated into acts of meaning making (Kress, 2000; Kress & Jewitt, 2003). This transfer in the emphasis of meaning making away from language is due to globalization and local diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). That is, through the globalization of markets these youths' social worlds are influenced by diverse cultural forms and sign systems, as well as new technologies. Students' literacy practices involve framing images, expressing ideas, and making meaning through a variety of sign or semiotic systems and modalities (Kress, 1997). Schools inherently privilege written forms of expression, such as reading and writing. Language, however, is only one of many avenues through which messages are conveyed, meaning making is made, and representations are presented (Kress, 1997). Multimodal acts of meaning making, or texts that combine various modes and forms, afford youth more varied ways to express themselves, their knowledge, and their learning (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997).

The choices of modes are culturally and socially shaped and determined by the interests of the maker (Kress, 1997, 2000). Youth, in particular, design artifacts based on the resources they encounter and their interests. When these students were allowed to design inquiry projects based on their interests, many of them focused on multimodal texts they encounter in their daily lives. For example, they interacted with a story like *Dragonball Z* across varying representations: as a video game, a comic book, and a movie. Through their inquiry-based projects described in more detail in this article, the students were able to create their own representations of *Dragonball Z*. The inquiry-based projects allowed my students to draw on and combine the different languages, writing systems, and modes of meaning making available as they so naturally do in their daily lives. Thus, reflective of their every-

day literacy and language practices my students created multilingual and multimodal texts.

Closing social and cultural distances

The importance of creating caring and supportive classroom environments that address the cultural and emotional needs of students has been discussed by several researchers (Collier, 1995; Igoa, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). Establishing a sense of connectedness fostered through authentic caring can have a direct impact on students' success in schools (Valenzuela). Many educators argue that valuing the students' experiences with language and culture will help to close the social and cultural distances between student–teacher relationships (Diaz & Flores, 2001; Valenzuela). Making space within classrooms for the language and literacy practices of students is one way to create culturally sensitive communities of learning (Perez & Nordlander, 2004).

Inquiry-based projects allow for the language and literacy practices of students to enter into the classroom. Democratic in nature, inquiry projects create spaces for students' voices to be heard, including the voices of students whose first language is not English (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989). They engage students in their own interests, spanning the divide between social and cultural aspects of school and the students' lives outside of school. Inquiry-based projects also give students the choice of semiotic systems to construct their intended meaning (Ormerod & Ivanič, 2002). Overall, inquiry-based projects provide for more human agency in the process of meaning making than more traditional approaches to literacy and language learning.

Context of the multilingual and multimodal inquiries

The projects discussed here were designed by students who were attending a summer migrant edu-

cation program. The program, located in an urban community of the northeastern United States, provides supplemental education during the summer for children of migratory agricultural workers. To qualify for the program, the students' parents must be agricultural workers and the students must have moved with their families into the school district boundaries within the previous three years. In this particular migrant education program the majority of the students were Cambodian (ethnic Khmer); the second largest group of students was Vietnamese. Other students were Laotian, Somalian, Albanian, or Mexican. There were also a growing number of students from the Fuzhou region of China. All of the students attended public schools throughout the city during the regular school year. I worked at the migrant education program from 1996 to 2001 as the literacy teacher. Like the other teachers in the program, I was a certified public school teacher. I admit that the summer program afforded me more flexibility and freedom in my choices of curriculum; yet, there were also constraints due to limited time and limited resources. Regardless of these aspects, I believe there are lessons to be learned for classroom teachers from this curriculum.

The summer migrant education program was held on the sixth floor of an old and dilapidated urban high school. The school had no air conditioning and often no working elevator. Some of the students had literally arrived in the United States from rural areas of China, Vietnam, and Cambodia just one to two weeks prior to the program. They were still adjusting to their move and to urban America where they were being told to walk through weapon detectors as they entered school. The other students who had been in the United States longer had already been acculturated into the ways of urban America. Many had been deemed by their public schools as "at-risk" students. My desire was to create a small space of caring and support for these students. I also had a strong desire to learn more about my students and their language and literacy practices. Both of these desires prompted me to consider building a curriculum around their interests, knowledge,

and social worlds. Inquiry-based projects provide opportunities to build such a curriculum.

Peer bonding through collaboration

Igoa (1995) discussed the significance of peer bonding in helping immigrant students adapt to their "new reality." Allowing students to work with partners or in groups facilitates peer bonding, and therefore can also lessen initial feelings of isolation and loss (Perez, 2004). The first step of the inquiry-based projects was for my students to form collaborative groups. Several of the students were new to the United States, and they found students who reached out to work with them. Others formed groups based on friendships from previous summers or from their public schools. The students gravitated toward those who had come from the same country and spoke the same language. Those students who had English as their dominant language also formed groups together. These groups did not surprise me. They offered students a safe place to use their first language and bond with their peers.

Once in their groups they began choosing their topics of inquiry. I did not influence their choices because I did not want to impose my vision of topics or purpose on their projects. Because each student brought to the classroom not only different life experiences but also different experiences with language and literacy, I wanted the students' projects to be personally meaningful and connect to their interests. As they worked, the students spoke to one another in their desired languages, allowing all students participation in the discussions. Those who were more dominant in English translated to me their groups' ideas. This allowed for the differing levels of expertise in the languages. It created a space for students to communicate in a more advanced way than if they were asked to communicate in only English. I could not speak the different languages, but we still shared a lot of smiles.

The students made their decisions about the inquiry projects quickly. Their choices, as mentioned earlier, ranged from investigating rap music in the United States to writing about fruit from their home country. The collaboration of the students was one step in creating a comfortable, friendly classroom environment. For some of the girls who had recently arrived from Vietnam, their project served as an avenue to form a bond with other students who were experiencing the same feelings. Thus, their inquiry-based project on the fruits from home that they missed provided these girls with the time and space to address their feelings of loss. For students like the Cambodian boys who had lived in the United States for many years, their project on rap was a space for them to make sense of their urban identities. Another student's project on Cambodia served as a way to connect him with his cultural inheritance. It becomes apparent, therefore, that inquiry-based projects support not only peer bonding but also important identity work and the emotional side of learning.

Integration of languages, modalities, and technologies

Once the students had chosen their topics and began working on their projects, I encouraged them to formulate investigative questions. For example, one group decided upon the question "What is the original story of Dragonball Z?" Another group asked, "What is the history of rap?" Next the students began figuring out what resources they would need to answer their questions. One obstacle to overcome was the dearth of resources and materials in the summer migrant education program. There were very few reference books, one computer for the whole program with limited software and no Internet access, and a small reserve of paper and pencils. Very few, if any, resources were available in the primary languages of the students. The students also did not have access to a wide range of references, supplies, or computers outside of school. Therefore, we had to use the resources we had available in the

best way that we could. One group of boys from Fuzhou relied on their knowledge of the X-Men from watching a movie. The other group of boys from Fuzhou used the Pokémon cartoons and trading cards as their resources. The Khmer rap boys found some information on a CD-ROM encyclopedia the program owned. They also referenced popular magazines for information on current rap groups and songs. The girls describing the fruits they missed relied on their own cultural knowledge and experiences. They also questioned an elder woman in their community. Than (all student names are pseudonyms) worked alone on the history of Cambodia. He found books at his local library. I took one member of the Dragonball Z group to my university library so she could search the Internet to find information on the story of Dragonball Z.

The limited resources actually became a strong point in the students' learning. Instead of relying on traditional published school texts, the students had to seek out other resources for their information. Through this inquiry, they interacted around multiple genres and modes. In constructing their knowledge they used technologies, movies, magazines, and other sources they considered to be most relevant to their task. The students were learning language by using language the way they would naturally in their own lives (Edelsky, Altweger, & Flores, 1991). In addition, the students' own knowledge and the members of their communities became valuable resources during their investigations.

Although the majority of the resources were in English, the students discussed the content of the sources in their primary languages. As pointed out earlier, the group of boys investigating Pokémon looked at the trading cards printed in English with the names of characters in Japanese, but discussed their project in Fuzhouese. The Khmer rap boys read texts in standard forms of English, and in the dialect of rap, yet often code switched between Khmer and English when discussing ideas. Meanwhile the girls from Vietnam discussed their project in Vietnamese while an-

other group of girls from Cambodia discussed theirs in Khmer. In this way there was an integration of different languages within groups and within the classroom. The students were able to use their language to talk around texts and to explore their knowledge together. Through this collaborative activity, they were learning from their peers and acquiring knowledge about language. Language and literacy learning emerged as the students participated in different ways (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997).

The students had gathered the information they needed, so it was time for them to begin to decide how they would represent that knowledge to others. I allowed students freedom in their designs; however, due to the sparseness of resources each group was limited to a “tri-fold” poster for their displays. On the poster the students could represent their knowledge through a range of modes. Although similar in format (mostly representations through words and images presented on the one-dimensional surface), each project had its own distinct characteristics. Each group combined different linguistic, visual, and physical characteristics to create multimodal and multilingual texts.

Moving across different modes and different codes

Dragonball Z

As noted previously, within the students' social worlds meaning making has become increasingly multimodal—visual and linguistic designs are combined to create texts. Because students create artifacts that derive from their interests and the texts they encounter within their natural world, it is important for literacy learning in schools to also recognize that “literacy is in its nature multimodal” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 234). The integration of different modes of communication extends the students' potential for meaning making. When my students were allowed to choose topics for their projects, many included the texts they interacted with in their daily lives. Not only

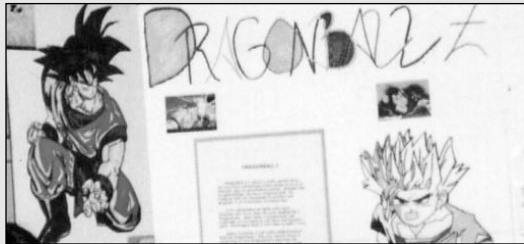
were the students interested in their multimodal texts, but also they were involved in a situated process of meaning making through their projects based on those texts. In addition, I learned about the types of texts my students found interesting and gained a broader perspective of their abilities and knowledge.

For example, Sary loved to draw. She was always sketching something inside a notebook, whether it was a protective god of Angkor Wat or a Japanese anime character. Her favorite Japanese anime was Dragonball Z. Together with two other members of her group, she chose to investigate the story of Dragonball Z. She invested a lot of time at home on her project, creating the figures for her groups' presentation. She made sure I knew that she drew the figures rather than traced them. This was not simply a drawing without meaning, which teachers sometimes believe when students draw pictures to accompany texts. She gave her drawings a three-dimensional perspective. They seemed ready to jump off of the page. She told me, “I want them to look real.”

In addition, Sary worked on the text about Dragonball Z with her friend. The information she took off the Internet was used to construct the written text, and together they wrote an explanation of Dragonball Z. This collaborative recursive practice of writing was also one the students used to design their multimodal text. They moved back and forth between different modes—the visual, the written, and the physical aspects of their texts. They planned carefully the distinct placement of pictures, words, and additional materials, like Dragonball Z collection cards. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are only pieces of their project, but they show the idiosyncratic and sophisticated nature of their design.

Too often in classrooms, drawings are seen as supplemental or as a scaffold for English-language learning. A visual image, however, can enhance a text or convey meaning from it. Sary's story about Dragonball Z and her visual images demonstrate a complex interplay between the visual and the written text. Sary and her group members had set a

Figure 1
A drawing from Sary's
Dragonball Z project



Photograph by Theresa Ann McGinnis.

Figure 2
Text from Sary's
Dragonball Z project

Dragonball Z

Dragonball Z is about a child named Goku. He has many adventures and a large amount of strength, like his grandfather Aohan. Dressed like his grandfather, he has a magical staff. His magical staff has the power to shorten and lengthen in an extremely amazing way.

In his adventures he fights with many enemies who try to stop him from finding the 7 Dragonballs. After these 7 Dragonballs are collected, it's possible to call upon the Dragon spirit. The Dragon Spirit is only able to fulfill 1 wish.

Goku, however, is not really determined to find the Dragonballs. The only reason Goku is searching for the Dragonball is because he wants one of the seven Dragonballs. He wants one of the seven Dragonballs, because this one has four stars which were given to him from his grandfather as a gift.

As the story goes on, Goku grows and fights many battles, as the adventure gets more exciting.

goal: to find out the overall theme of the Japanese anime Dragonball Z. This is what they accomplished. The theme they described runs through-

out all of the different television episodes of Dragonball Z. The visual images, along with trading cards they placed strategically on their poster, enhanced the meaning of the written text. They designed a multimodal text that expressed an intended meaning. It is a text that was socially, culturally, historically, and globally situated.

Khmer rap boys

Hip-hop culture, generally considered constitutive of contemporary African American urban culture, was also a part of the Khmer youths' social worlds. Break dancing and rap music were popular among some of the students of the migrant education program. They listened to rap music and read magazines like *Spin* and *Vibe*. Rap music appealed to them because of "the beat." Also, they explained, "it is about real life." Like Sary, Dara carried a notebook. In it, however, he did not sketch pictures; he wrote raps.

Dara was surprised when I said, "Yes, you can spend class time writing raps." When I asked him what types of writing he does in school, he answered, "Essays, book reports, and autobiographies." Others noted they wrote to prompts in schools. These expository and analytical styles of writing are the preferred and valued genres in schools (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991; Routman, 2000). The types of writing activities the students described also lean toward an autonomous skills-based curriculum.

Outside of school, in their free time, however, Dara and several of the other boys played with words and used rhyme and rhythm similar to their favorite rap and rock songs. They decided to create their inquiry-based project on this interest in rap. They worked diligently writing raps for their presentation. They searched for information about the history of rap.

There are complexities and multiple dimensions to these Khmer youths' writing practices. They appropriated school and traditional forms of writing along with the writing styles of popular culture, like the lyrics to rap. Dara used sam-

ples of his favorite music as models for his own raps. He and his group appropriated the discourse of rap music and the language of the Britannica CD-ROM, which contained historical information on rap.

The two different texts differed in their language use. But the juxtaposition of these texts in the students' project demonstrated their abilities to recognize that each genre or discourse conveyed different messages to different audiences. One purpose was to provide historical information, as shown in Figure 3, the other was to provide a creative expression of Dara's feelings. Rap is also a performance, requiring a particular use of words and syntax much different from an expository text. For example, Dara used words like *playaz* and *ballaz* and phrases like "Rise by the bright sun playing with all of ya."

Dara and his group spoke Khmer in their home and often with one another. Through their project, they demonstrated that they effectively moved across different language varieties of English. That is, they were in the process of learning to control two very different discourses (Gee, 1990)—urban dialects of English and standard forms of English. The inquiry-based project was a place for them to express themselves through these different forms of language. As their teacher, I learned from them the meanings carried through the language of rap, as well as the vast knowledge these youth have about the language varieties of their neighborhood and of hip-hop. They showed me that they were multilingual individuals.

Considering the possibilities

On the last day of the migrant education program we invited the students from the younger grades to view the projects. My students explained their projects as the students walked by or stopped to examine the pictures of Pokémon, X-Men, and Dragonball Z. I was very impressed, however, by Than who had written a fairly extensive paper on his home country of Cambodia.

Figure 3 Text from the Khmer rap boys' project

Rap Music

Rap music is a combination of rhymed lyrics spoken over rhythm tracks and pieces of recorded music and sounds called samples, taken from older records. It was developed by African American urban disc jockeys in the mid-1970s, who began manipulating the records they were playing in dance clubs to make scratching rhythms and other sounds, creating a musical collage.

Figure 4 The poster from Than's project



Photograph by Theresa Ann McGinnis.

Several of his previous teachers had told me that he did no work during the school year. In my class, however, he had written a four-page paper on Cambodia, designed a poster with a picture of Angkor Wat (a cultural symbol of Cambodia), and had a group of second- and third-grade students sit in front of his poster while he talked

about the country. It is clear by the words on his project that he has “Khmer Pride.” (See Figure 4.)

There is nothing magical about Than’s engagement with his project. Students need time, space, and freedom in their learning (Fu, 1995). They flourish when there is a space for them to investigate their own cultural inheritance and to use their own ways of meaning making. When students can investigate their own interests, try different ways to express them, and consider their cultural identities, like Than clearly did in his project, they will. Inquiry-based projects provide such spaces and places within the curriculum.

In addition, inquiry-based projects provide teachers an important space to learn about what their students know and how well they know it. For example, in the brief time I taught the students I learned about the different levels of English literacy my students brought into the classroom and, as they worked together, how well they were learning new vocabulary and new concepts. I also learned that students were able to discuss story structure and character development while they were researching the stories of Dragonball Z and the X-Men. As noted earlier, I was also able to see how the Khmer rap boys used two very different varieties of English. By opening up the curriculum to take into account the students’ background and experiences, inquiry-based projects can become a starting point for maximizing learning opportunities and serve as a bridge to the required curricula of schools.

My goal in the future is to see more generative inquiries or more action-based inquiries take place in the classroom. For example, I might have had the Khmer rap boys investigate different language varieties more closely and look at how they are regarded in our society. The fact that they were allowed to bring different language varieties into the classroom is one step in this investigation and connects to Delpit’s (1995) “code of power.” I would also like to involve students in projects that engage them in questioning societal influences and the construction of their identities. By allowing students to focus on their own interests,

I learned that not only are they a part of multi-level, literate communities but also that inquiry-based projects created multilevel, literate communities within our classroom.

Allowing the social worlds of students to enter the classroom

When educators refuse to accept the kinds of knowledge and experiences with which some students come to school; when they do not value, understand, or even acknowledge the legitimacy of children’s lives beyond the classroom, nowhere is the student’s very personhood acknowledged or celebrated, [and, too often,] children whose language is considered defective are themselves viewed as defective. (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004, p. 17)

Classroom environments that support students’ multilingual and multimodal literacy practices are important. Students’ voices and feelings are often silenced because they are asked to work in “English only” or their expression of knowledge is limited by the focus on one mode—language only. Teachers also receive a narrow view of their students and make judgments on their abilities based on such curricula. By creating environments that support students’ multilingual and multimodal literacy practices, however, we can fight against the monolingual, one-dimensional norms of our educational institutions. When we open up the curriculum and allow students to bring in the literacy practices they engage in naturally in their social worlds, we are given broader perspectives of our students. We will see them as talented and capable learners, and we will want to create more learning opportunities that tap into these abilities and talents. I believe this dialectical process will lead to the recognition that students’ differences can be beneficial rather than problematic and can serve as a way to soften cultural boundaries.

Accepting the multilingual and multimodal nature of students’ literacy practices in schools

also gives students the opportunity and ability to move in and out of different codes and across sets of meaning representations (Kress, 2000; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000). What these students are doing, moving across linguistic, visual, and physical modes and creating texts that incorporate linguistic, visual, and physical modes, is becoming a highly valuable and important asset in our fast-changing global culture (Kress, 2000; Ormerod & Ivanič, 2002).

Like X-Men who fight against marginalization in society, educators can work against curriculum that marginalizes our students. We can choose to organize social interactions within our classrooms that draw on the social worlds of our students and promote academic success for all (Diaz & Flores, 2001).

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