Deborah Neff

Fulbright Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Edit

**Project Statement**

Studies of Muslim youth identity have been growing in recent years. However, research specific to Muslim youth’s Qur’anic schooling– a dominant practice among followers of the Islamic faith, remains scant. At a time when there exists growing recognition for the significance of home and community literacy experiences for school literacy success and when teachers are increasingly called to pay closer attention to the funds of knowledge that children bring to the classroom (Moll, et al.1992; Moll & Amanti 2005), it is important to explore the potential of Muslim children’s literacies for school success.

Despite being widespread and highly influential in shifting the paradigms of literacy research in the 1980s and 1990s (Scribner & Cole 2013; Street 1984 and Wagner 1993), Qur’anic schooling has been absent in contemporary studies that explore school literacies (see exceptions in Rosowsky 2008, 2013 and Moore 2006). Very little research has been undertaken to detail Qur’anic literacy and people’s experiences and reflections on the practice, particularly in terms of the impact of literacy learning across contexts. Moreover, research points to marginalization of diasporic African children in schools (Dei 1994). The question then becomes: How can we chart educational possibilities to include children marginalized by educational institutions?

This proposed study focuses on the multilingual literacies of five to fourteen-year-old learners of Somali origin and refugee background living in Nairobi, Kenya. Most importantly, it documents the connections between Qur’anic literacy and school literacy practices and aims to explore the kinds of advantages or additional strengths brought about in the process of learning to read simultaneously in different languages and scripts. Somali refugee families arriving in Kenya are among the most marginalizedin Kenya,economically, politically, and educationally. Outside of their home country, displaced from their national education systems, and in environments with little human and social capital, these families generally have few resources and confront great challenges (Harrell-Bond 1986). Yet they have had great success in engaging with locally and globally situated resources to foster and sustain their children’s Qur’anic literacy. I saw this firsthand in the prevalence and vitality of the Qur’anic schooling tradition in major Somali refugee settlements in Kenya. The proposed study seeks to understand how the Somali community perceives, talks about, and experiences Qur’anic literacy, a symbolic form of capital that can be transferred effectively to other contexts.

Literacy in Kenya’s Somali community is rooted in oral and written languages and imbricated in family, religion, gender, race, culture, identity, ideology, and power relationships. In focusing on this Somali community, the study will address the plural, complex, and legitimate literacies that such communities bring to secular classrooms. Within the context of migration and diaspora, Somali families have maintained close ties and have come together (at times with other Muslim immigrants) to run Qur’anic schools and even private Islamic schools. The determination of Muslim families to sustain and foster their children’s Qur’anic literacy is something that speaks volumes about its value.

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the perspectives of Somali families on Qur’anic literacy? How do they foster and sustain their children’s Qur’anic literacy?
2. In what ways do Somali children who have experienced both Qur’anic schooling and mainstream “western” education see each as impacting on the other?
3. What are teachers' perspectives of Qur’anic literacy? How do they think about and describe the relationship between Qur’anic literacy and school literacy?

One of the most significant findings from earlier studies that looked at Qur’anic literacy has been the potential for skills transfer across multiple learning contexts (see Wagner, 1989). Therefore, an important aim of this study is to explore how we can understand the notion of skills transfer from the perspectives of students who are Quar’anic-literate.