

# “it means *thank you*”

## Culturally Sensitive Literacy Pedagogy in a Migrant Education Program

by **Theresa McGinnis**

On a Saturday morning in the stark, dingy basement of an old middle school in Philadelphia, children of migratory agricultural workers are enthusiastically engaged in a wide array of activities. In the main room, Cambodian music blasts from a videotape students are watching of a professional Cambodian dance group performing the traditional Coconut Dance. On the floor in the same room, smaller children play with board games and puzzles. Behind a movable partition, children are repeating in unison the sounds of the language of Cambodia, Khmer, led by the Khmer language teacher. Down the hall, middle school boys sit at a long table sketching recreations and modifications of their favorite video game and comic book characters. Girls gather at another table to make floral designs of tissue paper.

The activities in which the Cambodian youth are engaged on this cold winter Saturday exemplify how afterschool programs, such as this migrant education program, can support youths' multilingual and multimodal literacy practices. These activities not only reflect diverse sign systems and modes of communication but also display the impor-

tant connections among literacy, language, culture, and identity. This article will explore these complexities in the context of the program's multilingual and multimodal literacy practices.

### **The Need for a Culturally Sensitive Model of Literacy**

The increase of culturally and linguistically diverse students in U. S. public schools calls for a model of literacy education in which the literacy and cultural practices of students are acknowledged and valued (Delpit, 1995; Edelsky, 1996; Street, 1995; Taylor, 1993; Weinstein-Shr, 1995). Current trends in education, including the mandates connected to the No Child Left Behind Act, do not support a culturally sensitive model of literacy. Instead, in many schools, literacy education emphasizes “monolingual,

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monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (New London Group, 2000). Success and failure in learning are often assessed in relation to students’ acquisition of English literacy and their ability to comprehend meanings that are based in the dominant culture—with no acknowledgement of the social and cultural basis of those ideas. In this context, the value of an out-of-school program like the migrant education program described here is its culturally sensitive model of literacy. Such a model recognizes that the many ways in which youth use reading, writing, and language are located within social and cultural processes (Martin-Jones, 2000).

A culturally sensitive model of literacy acknowledges and values multilingual literacies and alternative models of literacy. It recognizes the importance of developing a child’s first language and supports alternative modes of expression, since language is only one of many avenues by which messages are conveyed. Indeed, Kress (1997) believes that all acts of meaning making are multimodal; he says, “A sign is a combination of meaning and form” (p. 6). Youth have several layered identities that they express in different forms in different contexts. A culturally sensitive model of literacy allows for the human ability to frame images, express ideas, and make meaning through a variety of sign systems and modalities (Bakhtin, 1981; Kress, 1997).

Drawing on the work of Street (1995), Kress (1997), and Martin-Jones (2000), I approach literacy from a socio-cultural perspective. This perspective highlights the ideas of Bakhtin (1981) and Vygotsky (1986), who link language and literacy with culture and learning. Literacy and language learning happens in every social and cultural context, mediated by “cultural tools” such as symbols, technologies, and language systems (Vygotsky, 1986). The making of meaning is inherently social; it does not happen only through written texts (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1986).

To avoid oversimplifying the ways in which the Khmer youth in the migrant education program use literacy, I analyze not only literacy events—how the youth read, write, and interact around texts in particular settings—but also how their uses of literacy are connected to broader social and cultural contexts. The Khmer youth use literacy in culturally defined systems of practices such as participating in Khmer language classes, playing games, or participating in peer groups. I use the term *literacy* to refer to acts of reading and writing, but I also want to discuss how the Khmer youth use reading and writing in combination with other semiotic modes, such as art, music, and dance, to create multimodal forms of expression. I prefer the term *multimodal practices* to such terms as *visual literacy* in order to avoid using *literacy* as a metaphor for competence, some-

thing one either has or doesn’t have (Street, 2000). The term *multilingual literacies* reflects not only the discrete languages Khmer and English with their distinct scripts or writing systems, but also the varieties of English the youth encounter and use, for instance, the English spoken in their urban neighborhoods as opposed to the forms of standard English they are expected to use in school. The term thus reflects the diversity and complexities of the youths’ literacy and language practices (Martin-Jones, 2000).

## The Migrant Education Program

The federally funded Migrant Education Program provides supplemental education on Saturdays, after school, and during the summer for children of migratory farm workers throughout the United States. Migrant Education Programs nationwide serve diverse student populations in diverse contexts, so each program designs curriculum and social activities specifically to meet the needs of its students.

The urban migrant education program discussed in this article was developed to serve the needs of Philadelphia families who are bused to regional farms to pick blueberries. To qualify for the program, the students’ parents must work in agriculture or in poultry plants, and the students must have moved with their families across school district boundaries in the previous three years. Approximately 150 students in grades K–9 attended the Saturday and afterschool programs during the school year; the summer program had some 250 participants. The majority of students were Cambodian (ethnic Khmer); the second largest group was Vietnamese. Other students were Chinese, Laotian, Somalian, and Mexican. Each year, as new families moved into the district and other families moved out, these numbers changed.

The program’s students attended public schools throughout the city. In some schools, a student from the migrant education program might be the only Cambodian student in the class; in other schools, up to 20 percent of the student population was Cambodian. Students who did not live within walking distance were bused to the program. The program provided classes in art, science, English literacy, martial arts, and cultural dancing, as well as in Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese. I worked at the migrant education program from 1996 to 2001 as the English literacy teacher. Like the other teachers in the program, I was a certified public school teacher. My observations of the literacy practices of the Khmer youth are drawn from the whole program, not only my class.

The Khmer youth who attended the migrant education program were too young to have experienced the reign of the Khmer Rouge or the Vietnamese invasion of Cam-

bodia. However, their life narratives were shaped by their families' history of the Khmer genocide, the Vietnamese invasion, famine, flight, long stays in refugee camps, and relocation in a foreign country, followed by migration within the U.S. after their arrival. The youth's individual identities and social realities were shaped by four dimensions typical of this history and cultural background: distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics; survival skills and psychologies related to war; adjustments to a new country as immigrants; and discrimination, disenfranchisement, and racism due to their economic and political status in their new country (Kiang, 1996). In addition, the students in this particular migrant education program faced racism in their schools, peer pressure, and the effects of urban poverty. Although each student was of course unique, all of them considered themselves ethnic Khmer.

### Preserving the Khmer Soul

Mr. Tauch, the Khmer language teacher, expressed the importance of cultural identity: "[I] wish the Khmer soul lives always in the spirit and the mentality of all the Cambodian people so that the Khmer culture is still and always alive in our world" (field note, 1999). Language, literacy, culture, and identity are intimately linked (Gee, 1990; Nieto, 1996). Language can also serve as a powerful symbol of cultural identity. The Khmer youth in the migrant education program told me that, for them, the Khmer language is a primary marker of their "Khmerness." They knew that someone was Khmer if that person spoke Khmer. Mr. Tauch made it clear: "Our language is not *Cambodian* as many Americans call it, but it is *Khmer*. We are Khmer." Allowing students to explore and identify with their native language and culture enhances learning (Nieto, 1996). The program validated the cultural identities of its students and supported development and use of their heritage languages, affording students the opportunity not only to express themselves freely in their first language but also to learn about its writing system.

### Preservation through Language Learning

The Khmer language uses a phonologically based script derived from an ancient South Indian script (Needham, 2003). The Khmer teacher, a highly educated and respected member of the community, used the traditional Cambodian methods of recitation, copying, and dictation to teach the language. According to Needham (2003), in Cambodian culture this style of teaching is viewed as the best way for

children to learn to speak and write in Khmer. The recitation of the alphabet in the Khmer language class, as described at the beginning of this article, may seem to a Western educator to be driven by "skill and drill." However, the teacher conducted the class collaboratively. No student was singled out to repeat or read aloud alone; rather, the students supported each other through group reading and recitation. In addition, practicing sounds and letters was only one small piece of the class. Mr. Tauch also believed in passing on the history and heritage of the Cambodian people. Though the younger children practiced vowels and consonants, older children read Cambodian folktales. Than<sup>1</sup>, an eighth-grade student, told me, "I like the Khmer language teacher. He usually talks to me in Khmer. In class he tells stories. I like the stories. They are history stories about Cambodia."

### Allowing students to explore and identify with their native language and culture enhances learning.

Passing on culture and history to the young people, already an important value in Cambodian society, becomes particularly vital to a community that has relocated to a new environment. The youth are seen as an important means of keeping Khmer culture and history alive. In the migrant education program, young children received coloring books of Angkor Wat; the books pictured the gods that watch over the temple, giving their names in Khmer. Mr. Tauch had the older students write in English about the Cambodian government, the Khmer Rouge period, and symbols of Cambodia such as Angkor Wat and the Cambodian flag. The following is an example of a student's writing about the national flag.

#### Cambodian Heritage<sup>2</sup>

National Flag – It was design by Mr. Iev Koes  
In October 1953 it was officially used in the country.  
(White) temple represents culture and civilization of  
Cambodian people.  
(Red) = courage, braveness, blood of Cambodian people who sacrificed for the country.  
(Blue) represent peaceful feeling and tranquility of  
Cambodian people.

Keo

The migrant education program imposed no boundaries on language use; there were no artificial restrictions on where one should use English and where one should use Khmer. Participants used the language with which they could best convey their message and express their ideas, so that, for instance, Mr. Tauch used English to teach the history of Cambodia. Thus, students

learned to move among languages, choosing the language according to their audience.

Students also felt free to experiment with the writing they acquired in the Khmer class, switching languages as necessary to communicate their meaning. For example, one student wrote me a thank-you note for finding her lost coat. She wrote the note in Khmer, because she was practicing her Khmer script. Knowing I could not read what she had written, she wrote in English below the Khmer script, "It means Thank you," as shown on page 10. Through the social practice of writing a thank-you note, she was not only gaining expertise in using Khmer script but also teaching me about her language. The note became a multilingual text, and the student became the expert.

### **Preservation through Cultural Learning**

The Khmer language was used not only in written texts and oral language but also in concert with other modes of expression, such as dance and music. Students experienced their heritage language as a social and cultural process embedded in authentic and meaningful activities that solidified their identity as Khmer people. The Khmer language is embedded in other cultural forms of expression (Needham 2003), so that dance, for example, played an important role in maintaining Khmer cultural heritage. The dance teacher, Sokhan, was a high school teaching assistant and is Cambodian. Sokhan remarked, "We have to use Khmer in the cultural dance. It is part of the dance and in the music" (field note, 1999). Although the students had mixed feelings about per-

forming traditional dances, they recognized that these dances represent their Cambodian heritage. They felt they knew Cambodian culture because they knew the dances.

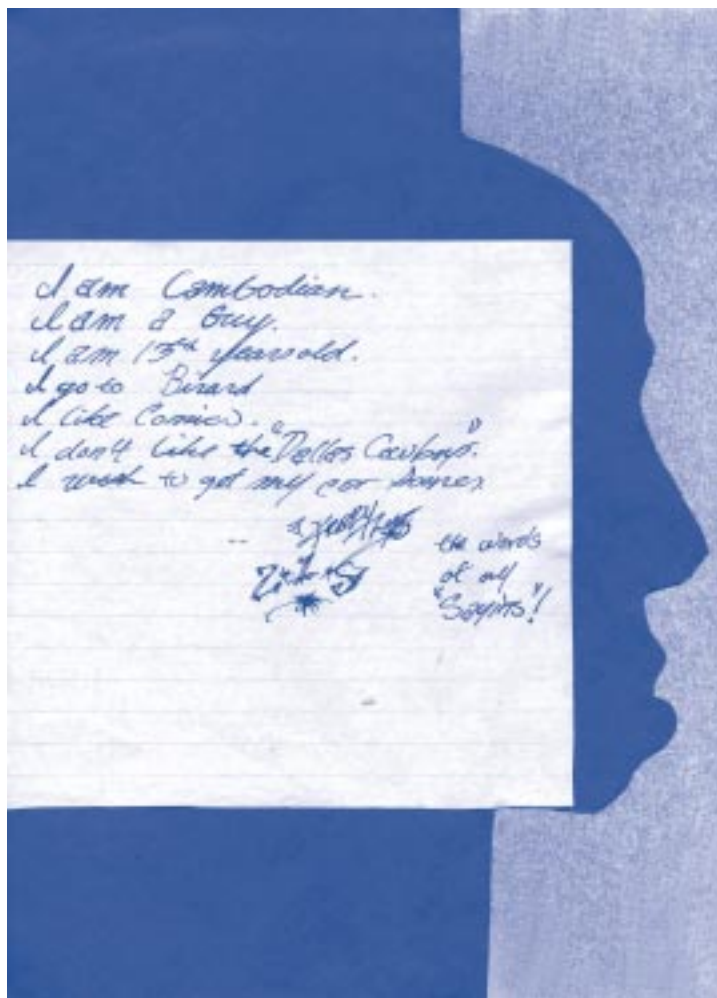
Students learned the dances both from the dance teacher and from videos of Cambodian professional dance companies like the one highlighted at the beginning of this article. The students watched and copied. Their movements followed the subtleties of the music, which was sung in Khmer. They placed their feet slowly and methodically, balancing as they moved from one foot to the other. Hands are an important focal point of Cambodian dance, so the students practiced fluid wrist and hand movements. If a student was out of place, Sokhan would walk over and

physically move the student's body, repositioning the head or molding the hands into perfect form—a method used by many Cambodian dance teachers across the U.S. (Catlin, 1990).

Besides providing a means of using the Khmer language as part of a particular social and cultural context, traditional Cambodian dance also allowed students to connect with the larger Cambodian community in their city. The dance students described at the beginning of this article were practicing the Coconut Dance to perform at the annual New Year's street celebration. At this Cambodian celebration, families gather,

and so-called gang members dance alongside elderly women in traditional skirts.

The migrant education program creates educational practices and environments that support Khmer language and literacy use in dynamic ways; the use changes naturally



Vantha's multimodal poem (see page 15)

according to the purpose and context. Students engage in a variety of social and cultural practices in which the Khmer language is embedded. Through this support of Khmer language and cultural practices, the migrant education program provides a critical space for the youth to explore their Khmer identities.

### **Multilingual and Multimodal Literacy Practices**

As members of several overlapping communities, the Khmer youth have multi-layered identities; their Khmer identity is only part of who they are. Like their non-migrant peers, these Khmer youth spend hours playing video games, watching cartoons, reading comic books, and listening to music. Their world is saturated with popular culture. The culturally sensitive model of literacy employed in the migrant education program allowed these youth to explore their identities not only as Khmer but also as urban young people.

I assigned students in my class to write a poem about things that interested them, both as a way to help them generate ideas for writing and to help me get to know them better. The following examples illustrate how the youth were influenced by both Cambodian culture and urban youth culture.

I would like to write a poem about Cambodian  
New Year.

I would like to write a poem about family.

I would like to write a poem about friends.

I would like to write a poem about school.

Sary

I would like to write about break dancing and  
head spend

And I would like to write about doing flying in  
the air alaround.

Ratana



These examples show how the students' literacy practices were closely tied to their personal, social, and cultural realities.

The environment of the migrant education program also allowed students to write for their own purposes. Engaging in a wide range of self-generated literacy practices, they produced multimodal symbol systems shaped in part by urban youth culture. As Hodge and Kress (1988) point out, youth's meaning making draws from social and cultural contexts in which they are positioned as producers of texts in relation

to existing semiotic systems. Producing texts involves not only creating but also modifying texts these youth have appropriated from their experiences in their world.

At the beginning of this article, I described a small group of middle school boys drawing at a large table in the art room. These boys were bent over the table, diligently drawing pictures of video game and comic book figures. Using only pencil on white paper, they were drawing, in great detail, characters with well-defined muscles, large eyes, and spiky hair. They (re)created from memory exagger-

ated female forms with small waists and large chests. Then some boys wrote notes about girls on their drawings: "Chandrie"—a young adolescent boy in the program—"likes Sin"—a female comic book character.

At first glance, the boys might have appeared to be merely doodling. On the contrary, they were taking a transformative or "new-making" (Kress, 1997) stance toward the signs and symbols of video games. The pictures were their own creations. When they integrated written notes with their drawings of characters, they created multimodal texts. They even gave friends nicknames based on video game characters. Younger siblings imitated the sketching strokes of their older brothers in their own (re)creations of characters from games popular with younger children.

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One seventh-grade boy, Prussia, began to design his own video game character, seeing this kind of design as a career possibility. He selected the features of his character from his own experience, from urban youth culture, and from video games. The character had large eyes like those of characters in Japanese cartoons and video games, but his physique was less exaggerated and more realistic than those of Prussia's popular culture models. Prussia dressed his character as he himself dressed: a popular brand-name T-shirt, a baseball cap, a peace sign—everyday wear for urban youth. When he finished drawing his character, Prussia cut the figure out and placed it, pop-up fashion, on a collage he was making about himself for a class. At the top of his collage, he wrote "Japanese." He told me, "I like Japanese video games, and I like Japanese things." He added more Japanese elements to his collage: a sketched map of Japan, pasted pictures of sushi, a Japanese lantern, and a Buddha. However, the character he created stood above the rest to become the focal point of his collage. Rather than being a mere copy of an existing video game character, Prussia's character was a creative transformation of characters he had known. Rather than creating a simple collage, Prussia systematically designed a multimodal semiotic presentation including art, words, and a paper sculpture. Making a pop-up of his character transformed it from flat representation to a concrete object with the apparent potential for action (Kress, 1997).

Such self-generated literacy practices reveal impressive innovation. The products are complex, intricate semiotic creations; multimodal presentation allows students to represent their multiple layers of identity and their varied interests. These productions are highly sophisticated signs and symbols that represent a dialogic relationship between the youth and their society (Bakhtin, 1981; Kress, 1997). By supporting students' choices of expression, the migrant education program allows the students to explore alternative modes of expression and their multilayered identities.

Another product illustrates how a multimodal, multilingual text can represent a youth's identity. Vantha, another middle school student, wrote the poem reproduced on page 13 and below following a formula assigned by one of his teachers in the program. The poem is a multilingual text because it mixes standard forms of English with non-standard forms connected to Vantha's urban neighbor-

hood and to hip-hop culture. It is a multimodal text because it was mounted on a self-portrait, integrating a visual text with a written text.

I am Cambodian.  
I am a Guy.  
I am 13th years old.  
I go to Birard.  
I like Comics.  
I don't like the Dallas Cowboys.  
I wish to get my car sooner.  
The words of my "Sayins!"

The content of the poem is clear: Vantha identifies as a Cambodian but also as an urban American teenager. Comics and cars are important to him. Appending the phrase "The words of my Sayins!" (sayings) adds a creative stance to the formulaic assignment. He has modified the assignment for his own purposes: to show that he is a "cool" Cambodian guy.

### **Literacy, Language, Culture, and Identity**

The literacy experiences presented in this article reflect only a small portion of the wide range of multilingual and multimodal literacy practices supported by the migrant education program. Taking a culturally sensitive stance toward literacy allows programs to create educational practices that allow for broadened notions of literacy. Such educational environments embed literacy in social and cultural processes, making the links among literacy, language, culture, and identity. More specifically, the literacy experiences of the Khmer youth presented here demonstrate how these youth communicate through a range of modes and languages. The richness of their experience supports the need to open up narrow curricula to accept alternative models of literacy.

Research into the fast-changing global culture has shown that the boundaries of differing social contexts are narrowing. Youth thus need to be able to negotiate their varying social contexts and communities (New London Group 2000). The Khmer youth in the migrant education program have begun to negotiate among uses and varieties of language. Their differing uses of language and literacy are connected to their multiple-layered identities, so that, in changing their lan-

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guage use, they may also change their presentations of self. For example, embedded in the traditional Cambodian dances are Khmer notions of women as kind, gentle, graceful, and refined (Ledgerwood, 1990). Similarly, the Khmer language requires the youth to understand levels of respect. However, the Khmer boys' comportment changes when they are engaged with their peers in the social activity of writing notes about girls. Their literacy practices reflect their different life worlds. Their practices reflect what it means to be Khmer youth living in urban America.

Along with negotiating across boundaries, youth in the global culture need the ability to "deal with a flow of multimodal sets of representations, to take a transformative stance with texts, and to be able to appreciate forms in ways that youth use them for their own purpose" (Gee, 2001). The Khmer youth described in this article engaged in practices that represent these necessary abilities. For instance, they interacted with the same popular story across various sets of representations: video game, comic book, movie. Then they used and adapted such forms to create their own representations, based on their interests, for their own purposes.

On a bus ride home from a field trip, we passed an abandoned building. A student asked the program director, "Why can't we make our own school for Cambodians?" The migrant education program has become a community for its students. It is a place where students can display, perform, and share their multimodal and multilingual expressions of their world. It is a place that opens up the possibility of full participation for all students and where privilege is not given to one language or one means of communication. It is a place where students can create symbolic sign systems that contribute to the construction of their interests and their identities. It is an educational institution whose culturally sensitive approach to literacy guides students to learn the many sociocultural aspects of language and literacy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Names of program participants are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> I have presented the writing and other artifacts in this article exactly as the young people created them.