Chapter 13
Transnational Immigrant Youth Literacies:
A Selective Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines transnationalism, social-literacy practices theory, the history of immigrant literacy in the United States, and an examination of central Mexican literacy practices. We then review and examine what is known concerning the literacy practices of immigrant youth living in the U.S. We define transnationals as individuals who participate in flows of people, ideas, capital and goods between regions. These flows are bi-directional, span national boundaries and are sustained over time. After examining historical and cultural influences on the ways that literacy is conceptualized and actualized in Mexico, we argue that all immigrant students, regardless of their ethno-linguistic backgrounds, bring to their host nations assemblages of information, ideology, and specific practices that we believe are full of either potential resources or possible damaging effects. Deeper understanding of these practices by educators provides a potential mechanism for bringing about desirable change or for maintaining oppressive racial and linguistic hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines transnationalism, social-literacy practices theory, the history of immigrant literacy in the U.S., and of central Mexican literacy practices. We then review and examine what is known concerning the literacy practices of immigrant youth living in the U.S. Our goal is to use the theoretical and historical information to determine how the literacy practices of transnational immigrant youth provide both resources for and potential barriers to learning. We see these practices as intriguing in and of themselves as well as useful for improving the schooling experiences.
and academic achievement of students whose lives are characterized by transnational influences.

Because literacy, as a social practice, is complexly embedded within particular situations, this proposed review of the literature is designed to examine immigrant youths' literacy practices across the various contexts of their lives: home, community, work, and school. An important part of this review will be to show how immigrant youths’ learning opportunities are either limited or supported in their homes, communities, and schools (Bartlett, 2007; Murillo, 2012; Ochoa, et al., 2004; Orellana, et al., 2003). These changes will be examined through the lens of transnationalism (Levitt, 2001; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999) and address the following questions: What is transnationalism? What are the most common and significant literacy practices immigrant youth bring with them? What are the historical roots of these literacy practices? What new literacy demands have they found in their host community? Are they able to cope with them? What opportunities and constraints for language and literacy learning do immigrant youth face in the U.S.? How can educators support immigrant students to become successful participants in academic literacy practices?

**BACKGROUND**

We begin with a discussion of transnationalism and what that could mean for literacy research. While the concept of transnationalism seems to have only recently caught the attention of researchers, one can find aspects of this phenomenon in many prior historical movements (e.g., previous waves of immigration or the bracero movement of the early 20th century, Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). What distinguishes the transnationalism of today from prior similar phenomena is the globalization of capital (Piketty, 2014) and grassroots reaction to global economic markets. The critical mass of persons described as living transnational lives and the complexity of transnational practices have led researchers to describe how current flows of people are shaping people’s economic, political and social activities.

Some definitions of transnationalism focus on the everyday practices of those most affected and posit that transnational immigrants live dual lives, speak two or more languages, maintain homes in two countries, and engage in continuous regular contact across national borders. Others emphasize transnationalism’s economic consequences and consider transnational immigrants as entrepreneurs who reap the benefits of globalized financial markets on an individual level. In this view, transnationals “deny their own labor to would-be employers at home and abroad, but become conduits of information for others” (Portes et al., 1999, p. 227).

Portes et al. (1999) stipulate that three conditions must be satisfied for something to qualify as transnational:

1. A significant proportion of people are involved (i.e., immigrants and their compatriots in their country of origin);
2. The activities of interest are stable and resilient over time;
3. These activities are not captured by a pre-existing term that makes this new term (i.e., “transnationalism”) redundant.

Portes et al. (1999) advocate delimiting the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require “regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (p. 219). They provide the example of the viajero (traveler) who delivers mail and supplies to immigrant relatives on a monthly basis or the Dominican clothing shop owner who travels to New York City several times annually to sell her wares and acquire new fabrics and designs. Necessarily, this excludes occasional
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