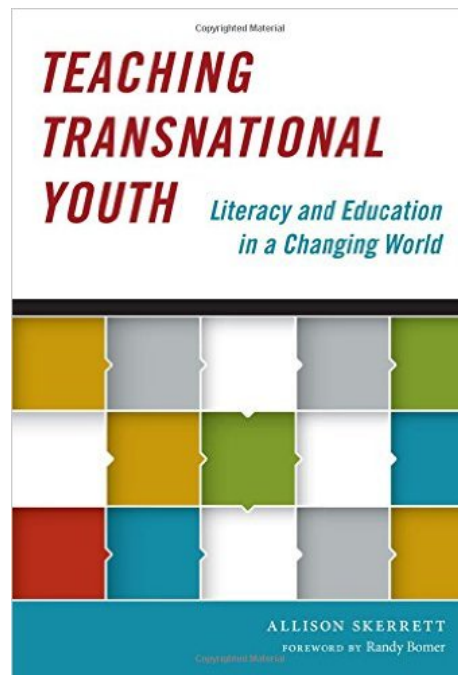


Review of *Teaching Transnational Youth: Literacy Education in a Changing World.*

Reviewer: Joelle Pedersen
Lynch School of Education at Boston College, Boston, MA



Skerrett, A. (2015). *Teaching transnational youth: Literacy and education in a changing world.* New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.

ISBN: 978-0807756584

Pages: 144

It is a scenario that has become increasingly familiar to educators in urban schools. A student suddenly disappears for weeks, perhaps months. Rumors circulate that she is “back home” in Ecuador, or Mexico, or Haiti. Teachers have all but forgotten, when, just as suddenly, the student returns. She appears anxious, overwhelmed, lost in unfamiliar content. Teachers wonder what kind of learning experiences she had while she was away. They worry about her English skills. Testing season is right around the corner. Major assessments are due. They must re-integrate the student back into school as quickly as possible. But how? In today’s global classroom, how are we to understand the experiences of students who traverse nations and cultures? What challenges do they face? What resources do they bring? How can we better support our transnational students as they negotiate the boundaries of language and identity?

Educators reading Alison Skerrett’s *Teaching Transnational Youth: Literacy Education in a Changing World* will experience a moment of relief as they begin the book and realize her insight and timeliness in finally giving name to this phenomenon. Though researchers estimate that one in four children in the world lead transnational lives, a lack of attention to these experiences in U.S. education research and policy has rendered the plight of transnational students largely invisible. Skerrett defines transnationalism as “embarking on a mobile international lifestyle through a mix of necessity and choice to take advantage of economic, social, educational, and other opportunities across two or more nations” (p. 11). In this description, and throughout her book, Skerrett highlights the variability inherent in the transnational experience and the many different motivations for living transnationally, as well as the academic and social challenges unique to transnational students.

The book, Skerrett’s first, builds from her experiences as a secondary ELA teacher and her work in the Language and Literacy, and Cultural Studies in Education programs at the University of Texas at Austin. She has devoted much of her early career to understanding the contours and borderzones of adolescent literacy. The fact that

she received the Literacy Research Association’s Early Career Award attests to the relevance and accessibility of her research. I discovered her work in my first years as a high-school ELA teacher, and it is her voice as a practitioner, even more than as a scholar, that still resonates with me. Her research sparked my own commitment to making my classroom a space where diverse literacy practices are recognized and valued. Now at Boston College, where Skerrett completed her doctorate, my colleagues speak of her fondly and with great respect for her groundedness in the challenges of practice.

Skerrett’s research advocates a pedagogy of multiliteracies: the kinds of inclusive reading and writing practices that will prepare diverse students to think critically and share ideas in the twenty-first century. Her commitment to culturally-responsive teaching, multicultural curricula, and diversity in education policy are all at play in the book’s socio-cultural exploration of transnational literacy. She ties her interest in transnationalism back to her own childhood experiences as the daughter of a seaman who spent much of his time away from home transporting goods across the Caribbean. Ironically, Skerrett says that it was not until doing research for this book that she came to the startling discovery that, for her entire life, she and her family had been living transnationally. Skerrett’s work is in this sense a very personal journey, and the power of her research lies in its subjectivity; it is impossible to separate her commitment to transnational students from her own transnational identity.

The importance of Skerrett’s book is partly semantic. She makes a strong case for understanding transnationalism and the immigrant experience to be fundamentally different phenomena. Unlike immigrant students, who must grapple with their outsider status from a fixed geographic position, transnational students’ national identities are always in flux. Skerrett (2015) suggests that the constant movement across countries and cultures makes transnational students, in the words of Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García, “more likely to see themselves as students between two nations rather than of two

nations” (p. 27). In addition to the stress and strife experienced by all adolescents, transnational students may struggle to develop a sense of belongingness in either of their home countries. The tendency to miscategorize transnational students as immigrant students ignores the challenges of identity formation without a stable sense of home and origin, as well as the difficulty of learning when school experiences are regularly interrupted. For teachers and school leaders, this misidentification also limits the potential for transnational students’ global educational experiences to be built on as resources in the classroom and in the larger school community.

Although Skerrett draws from three university research projects investigating student diversity and literacy education in the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean, perhaps the book’s greatest strength is its accessibility and attentiveness to issues of practice. She addresses the gap in literature on transnational education from inside the classroom. The book is framed by anecdotes from three transnational students and their teachers, and Skerrett skillfully weaves her own research in with these narratives. The book is less ivory tower and more teacher’s lounge, complete with detailed instructional strategies for what Skerret terms “transnationally-aware” literacy education.

As one example, Skerrett describes a “self-portraiture” activity, in which students address the prompt: “What do you want your classmates and me to know about who you are?” Using multiple media, students create pictures of themselves, their community, and their cultures to “display the whole terrain of who they are” (p. 52). The portraiture activity provides useful information for the teacher about students’ backgrounds and literacy practices, cultivating a sense of belongingness within the classroom while affirming aspects of student identity. At the same time, students are encouraged to critically reflect on cultural diversity and empowered in the telling of their own stories. Throughout the book, strategies like this one are explicitly laid out and illustrated with vignettes of exemplary teaching. This makes the book extremely useful for the teachers as well as school leaders struggling to re-integrate transnational students into their schools.

After beginning by setting the groundwork for what it means to be transnationally literate, each chapter of the book addresses different dimensions of the transnational experience, the knowledge and skills that transnational youth bring to the classroom, and how these can be tapped into to make literacy instruction more dynamic and more effective. Rather than focusing on the difficulties of teaching transnational students, Skerrett asks us to question our narrow definitions of literacy and our one-size-fits-all education policy around reading and writing, rethinking transnational experiences as resources for learning in the classroom that can benefit transnational and mono-national students alike. The book also suggests the importance of teaching with attention to students’ unique linguistic repertoires and their identities as multilingual learners.

Skerrett argues that literacy instruction for transnational students must be informed by a deep understanding of students’ particular life experiences, requiring that educators take the time to cultivate meaningful relationships with students and their families. This agenda builds on an understanding of transnational teaching as equity-driven, and is more radical than it might first appear. It is clear that Skerrett hopes to empower both students and teachers with her research, and her project hinges on respect for teachers’ professional expertise. Skerrett’s work reminds educators and policymakers alike about the gains that all students can achieve from an inclusive literacy curriculum and a more global perspective in the classroom.

The limits of Skerrett’s work relate, unavoidably, to variations in the transnational experience. The book tends to dichotomize transnational and mono-national students in a way that can be reductive. By definition, the transnational experience is not a homogenous one. Transnational students are at least as dissimilar from one another as they are alike, and it is difficult to generalize about effective instruction across a continuum of transnational experiences. Skerrett herself recognizes this from the outset. She does not presume to offer a universal formula for transnationally-aware literacy education, and any

reader looking for such a prescription will be left disappointed. Nonetheless, educators may struggle to envision what Skerrett's ideas would look like in their own local contexts. The three case studies that Skerrett focuses on are illuminating, but still just a small piece of the transnational continuum.

ESOL teachers and those working with non-native English speakers may also be left wondering about transnational students at different stages of language learning. Multilingualism is part and parcel of transnational life, but language learning occurs differently for every student. Long periods without use of a non-native language may mean that students require additional support in comprehension and self-expression as they re-integrate into the classroom. Many of the activities Skerrett describes are heavy on writing, and place high demands on students' literacy skills. What might these lessons look like for students at different levels of language proficiency? How can teachers create space for students to develop the translanguaging skills they will need to access curriculum across nations and cultures?

If Skerrett's intent is to uplift readers, she succeeds at this expertly. However, the wearied classroom teacher may still feel that the author does not adequately address the difficulty of what practical steps to take. While the book makes clear that a more inclusive model of literacy education is beneficial for all students, given the many demands placed on teachers in urban public schools including minimal support from administrators and the pressures of accountability and high stakes testing, some readers may find that Skerrett is simply asking too much. Is it reasonable to expect a teacher to be so fully present for a transnational student when there are 32 others to attend to, five periods a day? With limited time and resources, and little knowledge of students' varied language backgrounds, teachers may struggle to differentiate instruction in a way that is both effective and affirmative of diversity.

Another challenge for teachers of transnational students is minimal time to cultivate trusting relationships across the school community. Skerrett's vision for the classroom is a microcosm

of globalization, a place where students feel safe to share their diverse experiences and ideas, where difference is valued. But can students be expected to disclose private aspects of their lives to teachers and peers they hardly know? Even the best teachers may have difficulty connecting with students whose attendance at school is unpredictable.

Skerrett's book would be well-served by more attention to issues like these, perhaps with some framework for professional development of transnational teachers. Is there a model for how teachers might collaborate productively to support their transnational students? How might teachers share in this responsibility together? What is the school leader's role in supporting this process? How can teacher education programs work to prepare future teachers to recognize and meet the needs of the transnational students in their classrooms?

Although Skerrett's book does not specifically address school leadership for transnational students, it is founded on a vision of boundary-spanning and border-crossing in education that is shared by social justice leadership initiatives. Administrators at urban schools are well aware of the many divides of language, race, and culture that students and their families cross over and between in their daily lives. As the demographics of schools in the U.S. become increasingly diverse, and globalization becomes the new norm for twenty-first century life, school leaders need to develop networks of support that extend far beyond their own district. Educators must come to see their students not as bodies in a building, but as citizens of the world.

Particularly relevant to these challenges is Skerrett's discussion of how schools and families, along with educators across borders, can plan together to minimize the interruption of formal schooling for transnational students. She implies that there is much school leaders can do to ease students' transitions in and out of school. Building transnational relationships with international educational partners and facilitating the sharing of instructional materials and student records across borders is integral to this task. School leaders must

also support teachers in developing a consciousness about global education policy and school structures, as well as international issues of curriculum and instruction. In our conversations, Skerrett has suggested that the biggest challenge for school leaders is knowing how to start the dialogue about transnationalism. It is her sense that simply by identifying the issue, school leaders can help teachers to see the possibilities in students' educational experiences in different school settings and explore what this means in terms of the supports in and across which students need to be successful.

In public schools today, adeptness in multicultural teaching is no longer a luxury. To these ends, Skerrett's framework for teaching to diversity is an important contribution to the larger research base on culturally-relevant teaching and leadership. She makes a compelling argument for understanding the transnational experience as a resource that teachers and school leaders may draw upon in the service of expanding literacy teaching and preparing all students to be active participants in an increasingly transnational society.