

“Right now, we don’t have anything”: Unmet linguistic needs in the community literacy landscape

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Educational spaces such as schools and libraries enact localized language policies through publicly visible displays that alternately privilege and silence various types of community literacy practices. As Cushing (2020:432) writes, “Language plays a critical role in reproducing imbalances in power and dominance, especially when powerful policy arbiters have the ability to regulate and control the language of others.”

This research focuses on how the literacy landscape reflects the home languages of students and families in one linguistically-diverse community in Chicago. Specifically, it uncovers how schoolscapes (Brown, 2012; Jakonen, 2018; Savela, 2018) compare among schools of different types in the same community, examining how linguistic identity is indexed through the literacy landscape and what language practices are present, privileged, and erased.

This study begins with a comparative analysis of the home languages of one community and three primary schools that serve students within it: one neighborhood school, one selective enrollment school, and one private religious school. The community’s reported language practices are subsequently compared with the schools and the local public library in terms of a ‘literacy landscape’ of visible literacy materials for students, patrons, and families. This inquiry involves digital ethnography (Maly & Blommaert, 2019) of the school websites and analysis of publicly accessible visual literacy landscapes such as the library space and resources therein. Additionally, ethnographic interviews with institutional stakeholders such as librarians and parents reveal their impressions of the landscapes of the schools and library and the extent to which community literacy needs are met.

Results indicate that each institution within this literacy landscape employs different strategies that effectively promote certain types of community literacy practices while concomitantly silencing others. The neighborhood public school privileges English on its website, though a translation option is offered for certain languages (Figs. 1-3). The selective enrollment classical school privileges English, though some Latin content is featured on the website (Figs. 4-5). The religious school’s website features English, Hebrew, and Yiddish in the main text and in classroom pictures (Fig. 6). The local public library offers books and materials in a variety of languages; however, these offerings and languages do not generally meet the needs of this changing community.

According to local refugee resettlement organizations, over 1,000 Rohingya and 1,500 Afghans have arrived in Chicago since August 2021, a large percentage making their homes in this community (rccchicago.org; refugeeone.org/Afghanistan.html). Thousands of Ukrainian refugees are expected to arrive in the city (Cherney, 2022). However, none of the public-facing literacy landscapes analyzed here employ Rohingya, Dari, Pashto, or Ukrainian languages.

Asset-based recommendations are made for the institutions to improve their literacy landscapes such that stakeholders they purport to serve may more fully engage with the community.

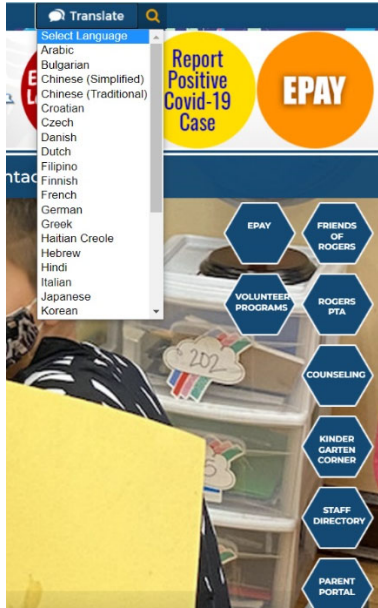


Fig. 1. Website translation options A-K



Fig. 2. Website translation options F-V

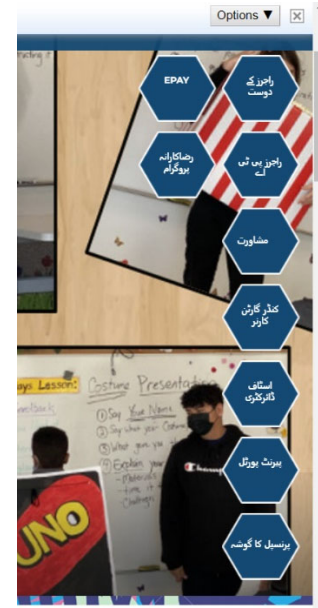
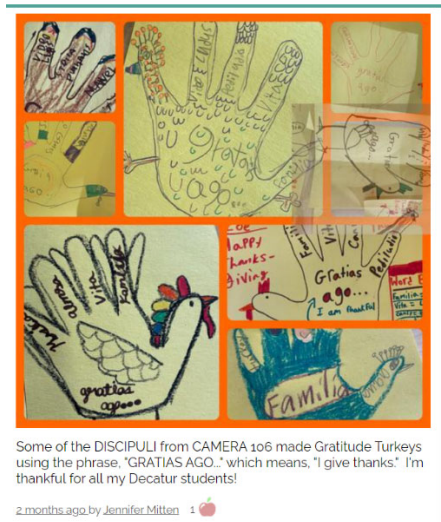


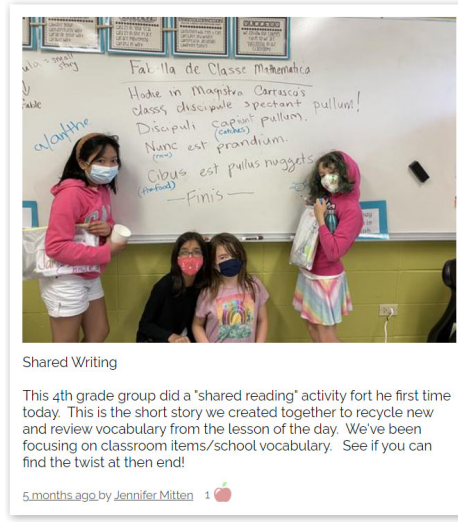
Fig. 3. Website translated to Urdu



Some of the DISCIPULI from CAMERA 106 made Gratitude Turkeys using the phrase, "GRATIAS AGO," which means, "I give thanks." I'm thankful for all my Decatur students!

2 months ago by Jennifer Mitten

Fig. 4. Latin on school website



Shared Writing

This 4th grade group did a 'shared reading' activity for the first time today. This is the short story we created together to recycle new and review vocabulary from the lesson of the day. We've been focusing on classroom items/school vocabulary. See if you can find the twist at the end!

5 months ago by Jennifer Mitten

Fig. 5 Latin on school website



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Fig. 6. English, Hebrew, and Yiddish on school website