

# RESEARCHWORKS

Discoveries in action at the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development

## Transforming teaching for immigrant adolescents

BY ANITRA BUDD

**Interrupted schooling resulted in limited print literacy.**

In the 1990s, many Somali citizens fled their war-torn country and eventually took refuge in large urban communities across the United States—with the largest concentration settling in the Twin Cities. Like immigrant communities before them, they brought unique cultural perspectives, which directly influenced their second language acquisition (SLA). Formal education for many adolescent Somalis had been disrupted by war and displacement. Many of these individuals had little or no print literacy in their native language. This pointed to a gap in SLA research, as associate professor **Martha Bigelow** (curriculum and instruction) discovered.

Bigelow began working with the Somali community as a volunteer in 2002. Since then she has developed several distinct, yet interrelated, strands of research regarding Somali adolescents. She has compared oral second-language acquisition by individuals with print literacy and those without. More recently she published a paper on the role of social and cultural capital in school. Bigelow also engages in community outreach work and research on Somali teens' experiences of racism and religious intolerance in the United States.

### What the research shows

Bigelow's contributions to the growing body of research on Somali adolescents include:

**Second language oral skills:** Bigelow has researched how print literacy levels in their native language affected the ability to process a second language orally among eight Somali adolescents. She found that people who had some print literacy skills performed significantly better on certain types of oral language tasks than those without any print literacy. This research is particularly important because most SLA research has focused on learners who are educated and/or highly literate in their first language. Little is known about the impact of limited formal schooling on spoken language acquisition.

**Social and cultural capital in school:** Bigelow discovered that while immigrant Somali teens may have a wealth of social capital (intangible resources from their social networks), their lack of cultural capital (knowledge and means to navigate the dominant cultural system) often poses obstacles to achieving their educational goals. She published a study focusing on interviews with one of four girls from a weekend tutoring group, whose story exemplified the use of social capital—via a supportive family—for achieving academic success.

**Racial and religious identities:** Through an extensive review of Somali experiences with racial and religious bias, Bigelow has developed a number of suggestions for educators interested in engaging Muslim students and building supportive classroom environments.

**Native language literacy assists oral second language acquisition.**

**Social capital helps immigrant youth meet educational goals.**



