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Becoming Literate in a Second Language: Connecting Home, Community, and School Literacy Practices

In order to help school-age English language learners (ELLs) develop the literacy competencies required for success at school, it is important to recognize and draw on the repertoires of literacy practices that students develop outside school. The concept of multiple literacies provides an analytic heuristic with which to consider the range of literacy practices in which ELLs engage across contexts in different languages and various modalities. In this article, my aims are (a) first, to provide an overview of research on the diverse literacy practices of ELLs, from young students to adolescents, at home and in the community so as to illustrate the range of research undertaken to date; (b) to suggest a critical literacy approach as an alternative framework for classroom practices;

and (c) drawing on two prominent examples of innovative educational practices, to consider ways in which to link the multiple literacies of home, community, and school.

FOR SCHOOL-AGE English language learners (ELLs), there is not a single path to becoming literate in their second language (L2). For some children of immigrants whose home language is other than English, the acquisition of school-based literacy in English may entail a loss of opportunity to develop their first-language literacy. For others, the acquisition of English literacy may take place simultaneously with developing literacy in their first language and/or the language of their religion. But there are yet other children who fail to become fully literate in either first language (L1) or L2. In the first part of this article, I explore the diverse literacy experiences of ELLs outside school; I then consider some classroom implications of the preceding discussion. My main focus is on ELLs, that is to say, those children of immi-

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grants who speak a language other than English at home and who have limited ability to understand, speak, read, and write English (Meyer, Madden, & McGrath, 2004).¹

When considering the literacy practices of ELLs, the concept of multiple literacies is important because ELLs inevitably have to engage in a wide range of literacy practices—across contexts, in different languages, in different domains, and for various purposes. Although school-based literacy has come to be seen as the defining literacy from an educational perspective, there are many different types of literacy practices in people's lives in addition to school-sanctioned literacy (Street, 1995). Thus, while success with academic literacy in English is important with respect to the construction of a viable academic identity, out-of-school literacy practices in multiple languages must be considered equally consequential in the overall development of students' identities.

Literacy Practices at Home and in the Community

Literacy practices in nonschool settings have attracted considerable attention from researchers of English as L1 over the past two decades. Barton and Hamilton (1998), for example, have found that literacy is an integral part of people's lives outside school and they describe the satisfaction that ordinary people experience in personal writing. At the same time, it has been found that literacy practices vary from one cultural community to another and, in particular, in the ways in which children are involved in them, as was described in Heath's (1983) 10-year ethnographic study of three neighboring communities in Piedmont, South Carolina.

However, despite the considerable amount of research on children's out-of-school literacy practices in English L1 settings, there has been a dearth of similar research for ELLs. Because of this paucity of research, I will also draw in this section on studies that have examined the literacy practices of ethnic minority students at home and in the community, since minority students engage in mul-

tilingual literacy practices in much the same ways that many ELLs do.

One of the salient findings that have emerged is that children's out-of-school literacy practices are mediated not only by parents but also by siblings and a larger support network that includes the extended family. In Hawkins's (2005) study of ELL kindergartners in the United States, for example, Anton, a Peruvian boy, was looked after by his older sister, as their mother was often out at work. Even when at home, she ceded the caregiver role to her daughter. Anton's fourth-grade sister had him work with her on schoolwork in English and also created lessons for him, modeling school practices in content and structure. In this way, she unconsciously apprenticed her brother to school-sanctioned literacy practices. Other studies that have examined out-of-school literacy practices of working class Latino families have similarly pointed to the existence of an extended network of support, noting that Latino families often engage in collaborative literacy activities in public spaces, such as the kitchen or the living room, and involve parents, siblings, cousins, and extended family members (e.g., Volk, 1997; Volk & De Acosta, 2001).

While the studies just discussed deal with families in which adults and older siblings are literate to varying degrees, either in English or in another language, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) describes the case of Nan, a Cambodian elementary school ELL whose parents were not literate in any language. However, despite lack of parental support, Nan engaged in literacy practices in English both at home and at school, but in distinctly different ways. At home, Nan was a prolific writer and performer of her stories, which were enhanced by pictures and oral narratives. At school, by contrast, her identity as a capable writer/performer in English was reduced to that of a novice who was struggling to comprehend the textbooks used in her grade-level classes. In other words, at home Nan was able to draw on her existing artistic and performative skills to compensate for her limited English, whereas at school she was not able to access them fully.

Particularly informative with respect to literacy practices in the community is the work of Williams and Gregory (2001), who examined the mul-

tilingual literacy practices of young children aged 4–7 in a Bangladeshi community in London's East End. Outside school, the children spent an average of 10–18 hours per week attending *formal literacy* classes. Because their first language was Sylheti (an unwritten dialect of Bengali), some of this time was spent in Bengali classes that were offered either in the community center or in neighbors' homes so that they could learn to speak, read, and write Bengali. Further, as their families belonged to a deeply religious Muslim community, they also learned Arabic by attending Qur'anic classes in the mosque.

Another example of proactive parental involvement is that of immigrant Chinese and Korean parents in Los Angeles reported by Zhou and Kim (2006). The Chinese and Korean communities under study operate nonprofit or church-affiliated heritage language schools where language and cultural enrichment classes are offered. These schools provide an important social structure for immigrant parents of varying English proficiency to network with one another and access the information necessary to navigate the American education system. These schools, offered after school or on weekends, not only help children to learn their heritage language and cultural values but they also provide a forum for sharing core experiences of being Chinese or Korean Americans. In these two communities, parents also send their children to private ethnic institutions that specialize in offering academic programs, particularly in English and math, which prepare the children to succeed in school. In this way, the Chinese and Korean immigrant communities form a sophisticated system of supplementary education, including literacy in heritage languages and English. While not all parents of ethnic minority students push their children to attend formal literacy classes in multiple languages outside school, it is worthy of note that some ethnic groups deliberately do so in order to pass on their cultural, religious, and linguistic heritages to their children.

In sum, research has shown that young ethnic minority and ELL children engage in a range of literacy practices at home and in the community as an integral part of their lives. Their literacy practices are typically bilingual or multilingual in na-

ture. Some of their out-of-school literacy practices are tied to religion and instigated by parental wishes; others are of a collaborative nature, involving a network of people beyond the family. In particular, older siblings play an important role in mediating community and school literacies. Thus, the availability of a support network and of opportunities to engage in a variety of literacy practices with others seem critically important in enabling young L2 learners to become literate.

Personal Literacy Practices

In the preceding section, I have discussed some of the out-of-school literacy practices of young ethnic minority and ELL students at home and in the community. In most cases, they participate in these literacy practices in a supportive environment involving caregivers, siblings, friends, and other adults. However, as students grow older, while they continue to participate in family and community literacy practices, their use of literacy may become more diversified. For instance, they may take up the role of language broker, helping their parents deal with English literacy documents that are necessary for the family's survival (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). Further, minority and ELL adolescents may increasingly use literacy for their own purposes, not necessarily tied to their family life nor to school literacy, such as keeping a diary or interacting with others through the Internet. It is these personal literacy practices of adolescent ELLs on which this section focuses.²

Research has shown that some who are struggling readers and writers at school use literacy competently outside school for their own personal ends. For example, Knobel (2001) describes Jack, a low-achieving preadolescent boy, who used literacy to successfully promote his part-time grass-cutting business. Similarly, within L2 research, Lam (2000) tells a story of Almon—a Chinese immigrant ELL. At school, being stigmatized as a low-achieving ELL student, Almon attended ESL and remedial classes, learning basic reading and writing skills. As a result, he was neither able to participate in mainstream classes nor to establish

successful social relations with English-speaking peers. By contrast, at home, he used his personal Web site to actively engage in sustained conversation in English with others around the world and in this way was able to construct a desirable virtual identity for himself. Feeling discriminated against at school because of his nonnative-like speech in English, Almon opted to create a discursive space for himself where his identity could be constructed solely in writing. This self-chosen online activity subsequently boosted his school literacy skills as well.

Another way in which some ELLs make their out-of-school literacy practices more rewarding is through the use of an additional language in which they can express themselves more fully than they can in English. For example, Yi (2005) reported results of her inquiry into the range of out-of-school biliteracy practices in which three Korean adolescent ELLs engage. Outside school, she found, these teenagers spent much time in reading and writing, including reading and writing online: Internet novels, serially constructed stories, e-mailing, instant messaging, and surfing the Internet. However, they also manifested different orientations toward their out-of-school literacy practices. Soho, a recent arrival and a strong academic achiever, wrote extensively in Korean to express her innermost thoughts in her diary. Joan, who was resistant to school literacy, wrote poems in Korean and posted them in Korean cyber communities involving local peers and extended family members in Korea. Jessica, the most English-proficient student among the three, engaged in diverse literacy activities as a functional reader/writer in both Korean and English. These activities included reading a print-based English newspaper to look for volunteer work and to check events in the local area, reading fashion magazines in both languages to obtain fashion tips, and helping her parents with administrative work in English related to the running of their Korean church. Furthermore, on certain occasions, these girls seamlessly crossed the boundary between home and school (e.g., reading school-related books at home to improve English skills, doing school work at home on the computer while reading and responding to e-mail or instant messages).

Based on the accounts provided by Lam (2000) and Yi (2005), it can be tentatively said that, outside school, adolescent ELLs strategically and agentively use literacy for their own personal purposes to express their personal feelings and opinions, seek and exchange information, maintain and develop social relations, construct desirable identities for themselves, act as language brokers for the family, and improve their English. What Yi's study points to, in addition, is the importance of attending to ELLs' literacy practices in both L1 and L2 and, as well, both on- and offline, since even when ELLs are not English-proficient, they may have other literacy-using contexts in which they express themselves in their L1 or other modalities. Given that some students regard reading and writing for self and for school as completely unrelated activities, a question remains as to how teachers might tap into students' literacy competencies that are not publicly visible in school.

Helping Students Become Critically Literate

In addition to literacy practices that take place outside school, it is also essential to consider students' experiences of literacy inside school. Why do some children who lead remarkably active literate lives outside school tend to be disenfranchised when it comes to school literacy practices? Consider Almon. As a student who was limited English proficient, he experienced heavy doses of basic reading and writing instruction at school (code breaking, basic reading comprehension). However, he was not given opportunities either to engage with the substantive content of the subject-based curriculum or to use language thoughtfully to explore his own ideas. Thus, Almon's case points up the deleterious consequences of the tracking practices common in schools (labeling students and relegating them to particular types of instruction) and of the pervasive linear view of literacy development (until the basics are mastered, reading and writing activities that require critical thinking cannot be introduced). However, as Luke (2000) forcefully argues, school literacy practices need not and should not focus solely on (de)cod-

ing and surface-level comprehension of written texts. Schools should give students opportunities to engage in a wide range of literacy practices so that they become critically literate—not just passively decoding and retrieving the author’s textual intentions but also analyzing texts and using literacy to act on the world.

Advocates of critical literacy emphasize that learning to read and write is “part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). Luke and Freebody’s four resources model of critical literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1997, 1999) provides a concrete framework on which to base pedagogical practices designed to achieve this goal. This model is premised on the idea that students need to develop four sets of resources that are necessary, but not sufficient in and of themselves, for critical literacy; they need to be able to act as code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst and critic. In this model, the analytical and critical component is not an add-on, but an integral aspect of what counts as literacy for all learners. An important implication is that engagement with these four literacy practices is essential for all learners, including youngsters and ELLs from the early stages of literacy development onwards.

In this model, the analytical and critical component is not an add-on, but an integral aspect of what counts as literacy for all learners. Luke and Freebody (1997, pp. 218–222) suggest the following practices, among others, for teachers to enact principles of critical literacy in their classrooms (my annotations in brackets):

- Asking whose interest a particular text serves [e.g., asking whose voices are represented and whose voices are silenced].
- Examining multiple and conflicting texts [e.g., reading the same event described by different newspapers or by different individuals who participated in the same event].
- Examining the historical and cultural contexts of particular texts [e.g., reading written texts with awareness of the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which they are situated].
- Investigating how readers are positioned by the ideologies in texts [e.g., conducting a careful linguistic analysis of texts in order to uncover the ideologies represented in the language that is used].

Natural questions to ask are what these critical literacy practices might look like in ESL classes and in grade-level classes that include ELLs, as well as whether they are possible with very young students. The following example, taken from Comber (2002), gives a glimpse of one possible scenario. Helen Grant, an ESL and primary school teacher in Australia, works with young learners to counter harassment based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender. In one unit, Grant used film as a pedagogic medium, inviting her students to deconstruct how different films work and to produce their own films. She introduced the idea of multiple identities and explained how she, herself, was positioned differently in different contexts and how that affected the power she was able to exercise in each. With this impetus, the students started to explore their own identities. Grant then asked them to create a storyboard or a film to teach others what they considered important aspects of their cultures, balancing the use of visual images, spoken and written texts (including texts in their L1s), and music. Her young students were encouraged to present their histories—their home country, their journey to Australia, their lives in refugee camps, and their current lives. The final film was an occasion of celebration and also for self-critique, leading to more questions (e.g., what parts of the story remain untold?). Grant’s students were thus not only code-breakers and text participants, but also active text users and analysts in their own right.³

Underpinning this and similar examples of critical literacy in action is a very positive conceptualization of students as individuals and of what they are capable of doing with literacy. That is, students, including very young students and ELLs, are construed as competent agents of change and as able to use literacy as a tool for critically examining how social realities are constructed by various historical forces and realized by the vocabulary and grammar of language. Even when

students do not have fully developed encoding and decoding skills (as in Grant's case), they are nonetheless considered capable of engaging in critical thinking. In other words, a critical approach to literacy represents a shift away from a deficit model of learners. In this framework, teachers are positioned as *cultural workers* (Comber, 2002), rather than as teachers of the discrete skills of reading and writing. If teachers were to take this proposal seriously and enact it, the Almons of the world would not be relegated to remedial classes, but instead would be given opportunities to engage in literacy work at school that was substantive and meaningful for them.

Linking Home, Community, and School

So far, I have discussed the range of literacy practices in which ethnic minority and ELL students, from youngsters to adolescents, engage across settings, in different languages, and in various modalities. In many cases, students were seen to engage in literacy practices that are bilingual or multilingual in nature as an integral part of their lives. Younger students are likely to engage in literacy practices, assisted by significant others, involving a network of people within and beyond their families. Outside school, students may also participate in heritage language classes or academic tutoring services or religious practices that involve the learning of the language of their faith. While young students' literacy practices outside school occur as part of their family lives and are supported by others, many adolescents increasingly use literacy for their own purposes in order to meet their economic, social, emotional, and intellectual needs. In so doing, they use a variety of genres, from personal writing, including poetry, to advertisements for business and plans for future activities, and for these purposes they draw on old and new technologies. Moreover, some adolescents deliberately use out-of-school literacy practices to create discursive spaces in which to explore possible identities. What emerges, then, is a complex picture of diverse literacy experiences that students bring to school, which defies the

making of any simplistic generalization about their out-of-school literacy practices.

An important question to consider, given this diversity, is in what ways teachers can make connections among their students' literacy practices in different contexts, so as to make school learning meaningful for them. I shall address this question by considering two innovative practices that have been described in the research literature. The first comes from Moll and his colleagues' (e.g., Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) research, in which they set out to overcome the disjuncture between the school curriculum and the lives of working-class Latino students in Arizona. Challenging the deficit view concerning the cultural resources of working-class language minority households and their children's academic competence, they argued for active incorporation of households' *funds of knowledge* into the curriculum. A research team, involving both teachers and university-based researchers, documented the community's funds of knowledge through ethnographic observations and interviews. Based on this work, teachers collaboratively created lessons that drew on the community resources in order to make learning personally relevant to their students.

To give one illustration, Hilda Angiulo, a bilingual sixth grade teacher, wanted her students to engage in writing, so she created an instructional unit on building and construction—a topic that, during her ethnographic work, she had discovered was of interest to her students (see National Central Regional Educational Library, 1994). With her assistance, they conducted library research on building practices and techniques, constructed a model, and wrote short essays in either English or Spanish explaining their research and ideas. Community members and parents who worked in jobs in the construction industry also shared their expertise with the students. Eventually, the students took the models that they had built and used them as the basis for the construction of a model community with streets, parks, and other structures. They also carried out follow-up projects that required additional investigations, wrote up their research, and gave oral reports to the class. By the end of the unit, the students had completed exten-

sive reading and writing activities with sustained engagement. In this way, by drawing on community resources, Ms. Angiulo created a social network for learning that went beyond the classroom walls.

While the funds of knowledge approach was developed in relation to a relatively homogeneous student population, in more multicultural and multilingual learning environments, particularly in urban centers across North America, alternative ways of recruiting the community's funds of knowledge may be needed. Chow and Cummins (2003) provide one such example. As part of an action research project in Toronto, Patricia Chow, a Grade 1 teacher, and her colleagues first conducted a multilingual reading survey in preparation for a dual-language books project intended to promote L1 maintenance and the development of English literacy. Based on 291 completed parental questionnaire responses, the team learned that more than forty languages were being used by their students' families—far beyond the teachers' initial estimate of fifteen. They also learned that the majority of families would welcome the opportunity to read and listen to dual-language books and that some parents would be willing to read or tell stories to children at school. With this information in hand, Chow launched her dual-language books project: children reading these books across the two settings of home and school over the whole course of the year. In addition, frustrated by the paucity of commercially produced dual-language books, Chow encouraged her students to make their own dual-language or English-only books, which were later displayed in the school's showcase. Parents helped in various ways (e.g., as Arabic word processing expert or as storyteller in class), making this project a truly collaborative endeavor. In this way, students had a setting at school in which to display their L1 competence. Thus, in a manner different from, but complementary to, Moll and his colleagues' (1992) approach, which involved teachers visiting their students' homes and acting as ethnographers, Chow opted to act as a facilitator of coherent multilingual/multicultural literacy practices in order to foster connections between home and school.⁴ What underlies both these approaches is deep re-

spect for, and appreciation of, students' home languages and cultures and an attempt to make students' experiences in both home and school coherent and mutually reinforcing. However, there seem to be a number of key elements that need to be in place to create literate environments in which students want to invest.

First, it is vitally important that teachers value and build on students' existing home and community literacy practices in promoting literate competence in school: what may be termed *boundary crossing*. That is, when the home-school boundaries are deliberately blurred or crossed, students' investment in school learning appears to increase. On the other hand, it can be seen from other examples that some students (particularly adolescents) deliberately set up boundaries, opting to create their own literate space outside school in order to make sense of their lives, to express themselves fully in their L1, to create more desirable identities for themselves that are not associated with school. Nevertheless, I would argue that, for all ELLs, it is important for teachers to develop an understanding of students' personal and community literacy resources and to try to incorporate them into classroom practices in locally relevant ways.

Second, it is equally important for teachers to reflect on what it means to help students to become literate and, on this basis, to create learning environments where students feel safe to express their ideas in a developmentally appropriate manner and to engage in critical discussion of substantive issues by using reading and writing as tools for thinking. In such classrooms, students would act as code breakers, text participants, text users, and text analysts and critics, even when they are still mastering the ability to crack the code. Moreover, it is important to recognize that it is from the literacy practices and literate discourse that practitioners enact and model in the moment-by-moment interaction with their students, that students appropriate and construct their own models of what it means to be literate. It is, therefore, essential that educators reexamine their own assumptions of what being literate means in order to create opportunities that enable students to master a wide range of literacy practices with which they can shape their futures in a rewarding and responsible manner.

Notes

1. Children of immigrants are defined as those who have at least one foreign-born parent (Capps, Fix, & Murray, 2005). In 2000, out of 58 million total children enrolled in the U.S. public school system, there were approximately 11 million children of immigrants; of those, 3.4 million were ELLs (or *limited English proficient* students). The current estimate of the ELL student population is over 5 million.
2. This topic is just beginning to receive some attention in L2 research; hence examples from research given in this article are rather limited.
3. Another example of critical literacy is the approach to curriculum that is promoted in Rethinking Columbus (Bigelow & Petersen, 1998)—resources for teaching about the impact of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas.
4. For further examples, see the Web site of the multiliteracy project headed by Jim Cummins and Margaret Early: <http://www.multiliteracies.ca/index.php>.

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