The Importance of Community-Based Literacy Research

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an explosion of research on making and writing happen in the context of children's engagement in activities that reflected their interests and needs. This shift in focus on reading and writing as tools for specific purposes in specific contexts (e.g., literacy practices within communities) led to the emergence of a new field of study, known as community-based literacy research. This approach emphasizes the idea that literacy practices are embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts and are shaped by the needs and experiences of individuals and communities. It challenges the traditional view of literacy as a set of discrete skills that can be taught and learned in isolation, and instead focuses on the dynamic relationship between language and social practices.

Community-based literacy research involves a range of methods, including ethnography, document analysis, and collaborative action research, which allow researchers to immerse themselves in the communities they study and to work closely with community members to understand their literacy practices. This approach has been particularly influential in the field of education, as it has helped to shift the focus from individual mastery of literacy skills to understanding how literacy is used in the context of communities and how it can be supported in ways that are meaningful and empowering for all members.

One of the key findings of community-based literacy research is that literacy practices are not static but are constantly changing in response to social and cultural contexts. This means that researchers and educators must be willing to adapt their approaches to the changing needs of communities. It also means that literacy practices are not isolated from other aspects of social life, but are interconnected with practices in other domains, such as science and technology, and that these connections must be taken into account in research and educational practices.

In conclusion, community-based literacy research has played a crucial role in shifting the focus of literacy studies from individual mastery to community engagement, and has helped to develop new methods and approaches for understanding and supporting literacy practices in diverse contexts. It has provided a rich framework for understanding how literacy is used in the context of communities, and has offered important insights into the ways in which literacy can be supported in ways that are meaningful and empowering for all members.
The Problems of Community-Based Literacy Research

The need for research in communities of practice outside the classroom and school seems clear. However, my exploration of issues surrounding community-based literacy research suggests that well intentioned though our work may be, literacy researchers risk over-determining, essentializing, and romanticizing what it means to engage in community-based literacy if we do not define what we mean by community and explicitly acknowledge the complex nature of communities, especially the ways in which communities overlap, converge, and conflict (Meade, 1992; Pratt, 1993). Defining what we mean by community is important as community-based literacy research expands in new times, because many different social groupings with very different meanings (i.e., neighborhood, culture) are being used synonymously with the word community in the literature. And, regardless of the definition given, many representations of community suggest stable, homogeneous, and relatively fixed groupings of people, a stability and homogeneity that is at odds with the diversity and rapid change represented by new times and fast capitalism (Hall, 1995; Lankshere, 1997; Luke & Luke, 1999, in press).

A focus on community as a stable, homogeneous, and unified group fosters the romanticizing of community practices in what Heath (1998) has referred to as "the power of the positive imperative," or the sense of obligation to present only positive images because so much past research on communities—especially marginalized ones—has been negative. Barton and Hamilton (1998) echoed this concern, but attributed the romanticization of community to the construct itself. "As Raymond Williams puts it in a discussion of the word community, 'unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used adversely'" (p. 15). Barton and Hamilton's concern suggests a further need for deconstructing the construct of community. The positive connotations of the construct lend itself to suggestion that the literacies connected with community must also be positive. This romanticizing of the practices of any group denies the presence of unequal power relations within groups and frames the analysis of ways that even seemingly positive literacy (and other social) practices may be complicit in the fostering of oppressive relations.

Finally, community has been used in recent years to refer especially to marginalized or minority groups (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Shabha, 1994; Garcia Candlin, 1995; Heath, 1998). Thus, using the word speaks certain perspectives and goals for research and often suggests either that the literacies under study need fixing or that they are all positive. Both such perspectives overlook or dismiss group and literacies that are viewed as less than positive or those that are not systematically organized. As Wade, Moje (in press) argue, these un sanctioned, unorganized, and sometimes verified literacies and their accompanying texts often serve important social purposes in the lives of those who practice them but they are rarely studied in a systematic way. Such literacy practices need also to be studied and understood as articulated to standardized school and social practices and to practices of resistance, marginalization, and oppression.

Thus, literacy researchers need to study the literacy practices of communities. But because we live in new times, in which social institutions—such as communities—and literacies are continually developing, fragmenting, shifting, and merging (Luke & Luke, 1999), we need to rethink how we study communities and how we write about what we learn about literacies from such research. In what follows, I use my own work and several exemplary studies to argue for the need to define our terms more carefully and, more importantly, to look for other constructions of community in the practices of the people with whom we work. Ultimately, I suggest that whether or not researchers want to study community "scientifically," we need to reorient our practices so that we can work toward the ethical representation of research participants and the useful application of the results of community-based literacy research in new times.

"It's Such a Messy Construct:" What Does It Mean to Study Community?

The difficulty of defining community for the purpose of doing research on literacy in the community became especially evident to me most recently when I was engaged in writing a grant proposal. The difficulty lay in two areas. First, my purpose for studying the community was to contribute to the development of culturally and linguistically responsive science curricula and pedagogy in two schools in Detroit. My premise was that one needed to know the communities from which students hailed in order to respond appropriately to their cultural and linguistic-—or literacy and language—needs and interests. Implicit in this premise was the assumption that culture and community were synonymous or at least overlapped in important ways. I knew that this was a tenuous and potentially problematic assumption, but I struggled to deal with it directly and succinctly in the brief space of the proposal.

The second difficulty in defining community for the proposal was that one of the schools I sought to study was a bilingual immersion school that drew from geographical spaces all across the sprawling city of Detroit. The unique nature of the school brought out the messiness in the study of community practices: Is the community a geographical space? Is a geographical
The move away from the rural landscape of "countryside" to the urban environments of "community" and "neighborhood" reflect the changing social dynamics and the shift in the perception of the self and others. The conventional understanding of community as a static entity centered on shared experiences and collective identity is now giving way to a more fluid and dynamic concept of community that encompasses the diverse experiences and identities of individuals and groups.

The term "community" has been employed consistently throughout the discussion, often denoting a physical space or a social group. However, the exact boundaries of what constitutes a "community" are not always clear, and the concept can vary depending on cultural, social, and historical contexts.

The move towards a more inclusive and flexible understanding of community acknowledges the complexity and diversity of human interactions. It recognizes that communities are not fixed entities but are constantly evolving through the interactions and relationships among individuals and groups. This understanding also highlights the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and identities of different groups within a community, and the need to address the challenges and inequalities that they may face.

In conclusion, the term "community" has evolved to reflect the changing social landscapes and the diversity of human experiences. It is a concept that is dynamic, flexible, and inclusive, and it recognizes the importance of understanding the unique identities and experiences of individuals and groups within a community.
an studying literacy in communities. When one examines the practice of a person such as Chile, community seems to be about neighborhoods, spaces, ethnicities, cultures, genders, religions, age groups, orientations, and so on and economic classes simultaneously. It is also about contact with other communities. To study literacy in any one community, then, would seem to require that we study that community's interaction or contact with other communities, while also examining how people identify with multiple communities simultaneously. Messy work on a messy construct, indeed, and yet too often community-based literacy research suggests the existence of clear-cut, stable, and homogeneous communities of practice.

Exploring the Literature: How Do Others Represent Community?

My own struggles with the complicated nature of community membership, as represented by Chile and the other youth in my study, led me to examine the literature on community-based literacy practices to get a sense of how the rest of the field was defining this messy construct. Like Rex, Green, Dixon, and the Santa Barbara Discourse Group (1988), who examined the use of the term "context" in literacy research, I was surprised to find that "community" is not a particularly well-defined construct in published pieces on community literacy.

Even a cursory review of the various studies of non-school literacies reveals that numerous definitions of"community" mostly implicit - abound.

These definitions range from community as neighborhood (Delgado-Gaitán, 1996; McLaughlin, Iby, & Langman, 1994) to community as culture - usually ethnic culture although they often also refer to community components of particular social-class groups (Calero & Ruge, 1998; Camatta, 1993). Other phrases that are often used in community in addition to "community" (which is also used with "neighborhood" as the word most often used as a synonym), were phrases such as "networks" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Wellman, 1979), "associations" (Salembey, 1997), and, one that I find particularly compelling, "circles of kinship and friendship" (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Some, as indicated previously, initially identified the community as the intake area of the school (Orellana & Hernandez, 1999); others talked in terms of specific groups, such as community-based youth organizations (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993), churches (Gelso in press), or families (Calero & Ruge, 1998; Taylor & Dorey-Gaitan, 1988).

This is not to say that the various studies I consulted neglected to describe the communities under study. In most cases, the researches provided thick descriptions of the community, but they did not discuss how they came to view the group under study as a community unto itself or as part of a larger community. More to the point, they did not indicate what it took to constitute a community. To borrow a phrase from Benet et al. (1998), it is important to ask of the various studies that comprise the research base on literacy in the community, "What counts when community counts?"

That said, it is important to note that most of the studies that I discuss here did not set out to study literacy in "the community" or even in a set of communities, although they do frequently refer to "the community" or "communities" in their written reports. What's more, each of these studies has made important - in many cases, critical - contributions to the literacy field's understanding of what literacy looks like out of school. I do not discuss them here to criticize the work they did or their findings; these are studies that have shaped my thinking in important ways. My intent is simply to use these studies to represent the many different ways that community has been conceptualized in literacy research and to call attention to the need to be more explicit in future studies of literacy in community settings - regardless of the way one chooses to define the construct or the purpose of one's research.

Defining the Construct

A few exceptions to the general lack of discussion of the construct stood out in my review of these studies. First is Barton and Hamilton's (1998) study of the literacy practices of one working-class community in England. Barton and Hamilton not only provided a rich description of this community and of the various networks of relationships within the community - but they also discussed and problematized the concept of community, arguing as I do in this article, that the concept has been overdetermined and underdefined. They also argued that beginning with a fuzzy definition of community - but seeking to specify it throughout their data collection - allowed them to pursue what community meant as a construct to the people they studied.

Similarly, Orellana and Hernandez (1999) indicated that they began their study by defining community as the school's intake area, but also invited their young participants to define what they saw as the community, a move that dramatically shifted the researchers' focus to spaces and relationships they had not previously thought relevant. The insightful observation that what the children saw as relevant to their communities depended heavily on where physical objects and discursive identifiers were located (i.e., they did not see, and therefore did not read, signs that were placed well above their heads), illustrates the importance of thinking about what community and community literacy mean in the eyes, ears, minds, and hearts of the participants of the study.
Heath's focus on history and situation makes clear her sense of community as being more than ethnic, class, or occupational relationships. Much in the way that (Scribner, 1986) wrote about space as a raw material in which particular racial, classed, or gendered relations are enacted, Heath articulated a sense of community that brings together ethnicity, class, work, gender, time, and physical space.

Clarifying Purposes for Community-Based Literacy Research

The studies described previously are exemplars of outliers—most studies did not explicitly define community in their writing about community-based literacy. In addition to a lack of specificity in definitions of community, very few studies of literacy in the community explicitly identified their purpose for studying the community. Studies that identified themselves explicitly as based in the community (they referred to community and literacy in their titles, or they appeared in Boolean searches using those terms) tended to aggregate in work that was designed to ameliorate some problem in the community under study, although there are some notable, recent, exceptions (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Caine & Rago, 1998; Guerra, 1998; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Moll, 1991).

A broader search in which I sought any research on literacy practices out of school yielded a number of studies in which researchers again used the term community in the body of their work. Although they did not identify the purpose of the research as studies of community-based literacy, the authors used the term community in their discussions and often used it interchangeably with terms such as neighborhood, culture, and ethnicity, thus suggesting that these studies assigned the label of community-based literacy to anything that occurred out of school. These studies rarely identified the communities studied as problematic. Instead they tended to see research in communities as a way of identifying resources or practices that could inform or challenge school curricula, pedagogy, or policy.

Each of these different definitions and purposes is embedded in a larger philosophical orientation toward or perspective on community, and yet very rarely did the pieces I reviewed discuss explicitly the stance toward the community or toward the literacy practices under study. Moore and...
group specifically, the Greeks, who lived on the margins of Perugia's society (Dias 1994). By contrast, although also working with a cultural group in this case, also Greek, the more often than not the research was focused on the social and cultural aspects of their overall their traditional society. Although both research was generally focused on the communities of these second generation participants in ways that help their children succeed. That is, the communities had perhaps typically been described as "have always responded to the need for community response, or the need of some, community members to the lack of response of a number of individuals, such as the community's lack of recognition that certain actions of the city's and its inhabitants are not to be encouraged." That is, the community's lack of recognition that certain actions of the city's and its inhabitants are not to be encouraged.
Studies that have examined the community as an alternative to school literacy practices have been conducted in various settings, including the United Kingdom (Baker, 1999). This study of everyday writing in a local community in the United Kingdom found that literacy practices are shaped by cultural and social factors. In this study, the community is seen as a dynamic, interconnected network of individuals who share common values and beliefs. The study highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and social context in which literacy practices occur.

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of an African American middle-school student. Although Kelly did not address what constitutes the varying levels of community represented in her study, she illustrated complex relationships between different institutions in varied different facets of the community, from the city (Oak Lake City) as community to the church as community to a particular ethic group as community.

At least four different metaphors and purposes for community-based research exist in the literature, and within each of these spaces on community thinking, people and groupings seem to count as community. In many ways, this complexity is warranted because communities are complex entities. So what's really wrong with these different uses of the term "Allin, all"?

Multiple Goals, Multiple Definitions - What's the Problem?

It should concern literacy researchers that at a time when other fields (e.g., community psychology, public health, cultural studies) are questioning the concept of community and the existence of a sense of community among individuals, "community" in the field of literacy is increasingly moving into what we have implicitly and unproblematically defined as communities to study literacy practices. I do not question the critical importance of literacy research outside of school in what we identify as relevant communities (Au, 1993); indeed, this is the research that I am doing and plan to continue doing. Nor do I wish to convey the idea that it is impossible to identify normalized and accepted practices of particular groups, practices that can be useful for rethinking standardized literacy practices in schools. Certainly the community-based work of Heath (1983), Moll (1991), Au (1992), Kato (1994), and many others prove such an assertion wrong. Moreover, at a time of increasing marginalization for many groups in societies throughout the world (Guerra, 1984), and at a time of public calls for increased standardization of literacy practices, there is a critical need to engage in strategic, unified resistance to marginalization and standardization; and this resistance can be accomplished through literacy research that highlights how particular groups use literacy in particular ways. Thus, the critical issues that I raise here are not meant to serve as a call for radically individualized studies of literacy out of school or for the dismissal of community-based literacy research. However, I do argue that community-based researchers should consider some challenges to easy assumptions about what constitutes community. In particular, we might consider how changing times and changing spaces shape research in communities. According to Glyn (1984), the deteriorating sense of community observed by many community psychologists has been attributed to urbanization, industrialization, and the increasing reliance on information and other electronic technologies. As Heath (1994) illustrated in studying the "children of Trackson's children," many of the youth of Trackson, which was a very small, definable community, had moved in search of employment to nearby urban centers. Their children were growing up without the community resources, practices, and knowledge that had been available to their parents and were making use of different kinds of resources - primarily media-based ones - in the construction of identity and literacy practice. The children of Trackson's children, were, consequently, developing identities that drew from multiple spaces, and they did not have access to cultural or social networks or communities in the same ways that their parents did. Thus shift from the local, traditional community to urban, fragmented community structures has been discussed in sociological (Durkheim, 1954) and community psychology (Sarason, 1974) literatures for many years, but the majority of community-based studies of literacy do not address explicitly the complicated nature of studying community in urban settings and in new times.

Thus, in urban centers, where communities converge, overlap, and conflict (Mace, 1992), we need to acknowledge that communities may represent more than geographical spaces, and that the literacy practices of individuals we study may represent multiple and competing communities. Mobility in new times is not just a function of physical transportation, sondern and other audiovisual media enable people to establish and maintain relationships - perhaps communities - across time and space. The work of Rosett (1991), for example, in a Mexican border community in California, illustrates how people use electronic technologies to maintain and build communities across geographic space.

Through the concerted migration back and forth and the growing use of telephones, the residents of Aguilla (California) tend to be reproducing their links with people that are not thousand miles away in a way that they maintain their relationships with their immediate neighbors. Still more, and more generally, through the continuing circulation of people, money, commodities, and information, the diverse sentiments that are intertwined with such force that they are probably better understood as forming only one community described in variety of places (Garcia Canclini, 1995, pp. 231-232).

Lewitow, Purcell-Gates (1957) illustrated the maintenance of community ties "down home" or their rural Appalachian roots (both physical and cultural) strong urban Appalachian. As Purcell-Gates argued, the "down home" community was as important to the literacy practices of the people
she worked with as was the urban Appalachian "ghetto" community in or near which they lived. Garcia Canclini (1995) used such boundary crossing examples to argue that the concept of community - as a geographic space - has collapsed. It can no longer be assumed, he argued, that "the links between members of those communities would be more intense inside than outside of their space, and that the members treat the community as the principal medium to which they adjust their actions." (Garcia Canclini, 1995, p. 323).

The conflating of community with ethnic cultural relationships should also be accounted for those who study literacy practices in communities. Miller (1988) argued that local and particular community associations have developed from the resistance to the essentializing of cultural relations and practices:

"Few historians would argue that our times are not characterized by a concern for local community... What we have not acknowledged is that the rise of local history and community studies has coincided with a revolt against a deterministic notion of culture as a total way of life defining the possibilities of human behavior in particular locations or times." (p. 353)

It is ironic, given Miller's argument that a focus on local and particular communities stems from resistance to determining views of culture, that many local and particular community-based studies assume the ethnic cultural relations of a particular group to be a unifying, and in some cases, totalizing aspect of their community. Heath (1998) has argued against a perspective on culture and ethnicity that essentializes members of the ethnic or cultural group, arguing that there is a tendency to try to generalize from very specific studies of very particular groups. Similarly, on the question of cultural and community identity and essentialism, Bhabha (1994) quotes Renee Green, an African American artist:

"It's still a struggle for power between various groups within ethnic groups about what's being said and who's saying what, who's representing who? What is a community? What is a neighborhood? What is a Latino community? I have trouble with thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories. " (p. 3)

Green's words echo complaints raised by the youth with whom I worked in Salt Lake City. Chile and her friends often questioned the ethnic identity with which they were asked to label themselves in school-based surveys and, although they spoke of each other in terms of color and ethnicity, all the youth with whom I worked described themselves as having mixed identities and cultural backgrounds.

In my research in and out of Salt Lake City schools, I learned first hand of problems of such overdetermination and essentializing of ethnicity as a type of community. For example, because Salt Lake City is comprised of a significant number of immigrants from Pacific Island nations, many educators (at all levels of education) commonly refer to the "Pacific Islander community" or to the "Polynesian community" in their talk about multicultural education. Although this designator is useful in helping educators think about certain cultural practices that might be unique to Pacific Islanders, it masks differences among the people from different island communities. Island rivalries (e.g., between Samoans and Tongans) do not appear simply because individuals have moved from their island homes to Salt Lake City. These differences were often represented in street gang alliances and in the ways that the youth I worked with talked with and about one another. The collapsing of each of these distinct communities into one led to a number of comments such as this one from a teacher at the beginning of school: "He's a typical Polynesian male. Doesn't look you in the eye. Doesn't talk." My research with this "typical Polynesian male" demonstrated a much more complex picture of him than could be represented in such a community or cultural designator. Even the more precise ethnic identifier, "Samoaan," did not capture who this young man was as a person, a literate being, or a member of many complex social, cultural, and geographic communities.

Similarly, one participant in my study, a young woman named khik, lived in a neighborhood commonly referred to as "Little Saigon." The neighborhood residents were not only Vietnamese, as the neighborhood nickname would imply, but were also Laotian, Cambodian, and Mexican. Ethnic rivalries regularly erupted into violent practices as different ethnic groups, families, and age groups vied for space and position in the neighborhood. Although this neighborhood could have been studied in much the same way that Conquergood (1992) studied a Chicago tenement - in which he explored the complex and conflicting relationships represented in the neighborhood - to have studied this neighborhood as a homogeneous community might have suggested a coherence and cooperativeness and a set of positive practices that did not exist in practice. What's more, representations of communities as homogeneous and fixed groupings may lead to the assumption that the practices of a group are all good and useful or to assume that all members of the group practice them with the same zeal or predictability. Recent studies of adolescent members of various ethnic communities (Dythle, 1998) suggest that adolescents often struggle to negotiate their membership in their adolescent peer communities, ethnic communities, and families, often engaging in practices that are in direct conflict with those espoused by their ethnic communities or by their families. As my representation of Chile illustrated, I observed
Chile engage in different everyday literacy practices depending on the group they identified with at the time of the observation. Many focused on specific aspects of community membership to the exclusion of others. I was hard pressed to explain many of her representations of her world. I could not, for example, interpret Chile's construction of Mexican girls' "gangster" apart from her gendered, ethnic, and social-class relationships or community affiliations (e.g., street gangs, skaters, cheerleaders) to be studied as communities. And, if so what in them do we represent the ethnic, religious, and neighborhood communities that also play a role in the lives of the youth? These communities' relationships need to be acknowledged for they shape and reflect the literacy practices and the hybrid identities of the people being studied.

Rishiba (1994) claimed that hybridity as an artifact of minority perspectives, "enforced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and exclusion" (p. 2), but I want to suggest that there would be fewer researchers interested in the literacy practices of any particular community if they pay attention to the hybrid identities of many participants in the communities they study, especially in light of the fragmented and shifting nature of all spaces in unequal times.

Finally, the emphasis on community—a term that suggests positive, organized, and "cozy" (to borrow from Horsley & Hamilton, 1998) relationships—overlooks many groupings and practices that are relevant in the lives of people, but that are not organized and sanctioned or that are not accorded the same privilege and power, even in ostensibly constitutional settings. I find it difficult to speak of "gangs" as "communities" because of the positive connotations of the term. And yet, gang practices were significant in the lives of the youth with whom I worked. Similarly, the "sub-rosa," or hidden literacy practices (Eindel, 1999; Gillmor, 1988) of smaller groups at people may not be acknowledged as communities, and yet these practices shape school literacy and other social practices in important ways.

Why Does This Matter and What Can Be Done About It?

Some of my concern with the lack of explicit conceptualisations of community is that many literacy research revolves around issues of representation and ethics. When I began to write about the people with whom I worked, I used a simple test to examine my representations: I ask myself, "What if I were the person being written about rather than doing the writing. (The test is simple, but the answers are always complicated.)" As I wrote about Chile, Kike, and the other four youth I worked with over the last 3 years, I have struggled with identifying ascriptions of each person. I try to put myself in their places in the one being identified. In what community would I sit if, for example, someone were to study a neighborhood in Ann Arbor, a neighborhood comprised predominantly of women, how would my literacy practice of sitting in a laptop to write research articles while sitting outside on my desk be represented? Would I be an outlier? A first in the community? Or supposed that I were someone, or even 50 members of the neighborhood being studied—the community? What of my other community members? How would they be accounted for in a study of literacy practices in my neighborhood? And how would the being together of my institutionally accepted literacy practices at the university with my everyday literacy practices in the neighborhood be explained in terms of the in-community versus out-of-community that have predominated in the literature?

Taking a different angle on the same question, imagine a researcher studying my community of practice rather than my community of geographic location. I am not to study the academic community of which I am a part in Ann Arbor, how would my literacy practices, as a relative newcomer, both to the field and the specific community, be represented? My interests and concerns are certainly better represented in the academic community than in my geographical living space, but there are still many ways in which I am distinct from other members of my academic community. What's more, the academic community lives in Ann Arbor might be very different from one in another geographical space, specifically because the geography of both physical and social space is different. How would these distinctions—the social identities and positions that I occupy in each community—and the contributions of the physical environment in which various communities are located get represented?

These are challenging and important questions for which there are no easy answers, simply because it is impossible to study and write about all facets of people's communities simultaneously. Ultimately, however, the issues that I raise regarding conceptualisations of community in community-based literacy research are more issues of ethics in representation. If researchers of literacy in various communities do not explicitly define what they mean by community or what the people who participate in their research mean when they talk about community, then such research findings may either be used inappropriately or not be used at all. This is just another academic debate over semantics. As Hare (1994) wrote in her analysis
Members of communities—especially in large urban settings—are simultaneously members of other communities, and their multiple memberships shape the ways that they identify with their various communities. Thus, to offer curriculum, pedagogy, or policy based on what we know about the community, or to elide community with ethnic culture, adolescent culture, gang culture, or social-class culture (among other constructions of culture) is to risk essentializing and alienating students. Specifying definitions of community, and problematizing these specifications—acknowledging that, in the difficulty one has in representing individuals as members of any one community—one can only serve to make community-based research more trustworthy, valid, and useful for reconceptualizing the teaching and learning of literacy in and out of schools.

Issues of representation and of the use of research findings underscore the importance of explaining our perspectives on community and of being careful not to conflate community with cultural commitments, gendered relationships, or political causes without clearly acknowledging how and why we are making such connections. Thus, if one wants to study the community as an ethnic space, then one needs to specifically identify the community as such. If one wishes to study adolescents as a group or a community, then one should identify them as such. At the same time, we must also be willing to acknowledge, as Macz (1992) did when she talked about workplaces as communities, that communities can overlap. "Any one of us belongs to several different communities at any one time. At work [or school], we are seen to belong to the work community. But because we bring the whole of ourselves to work, we are also bringing other communities there, too." (p. 116).

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that communities are not necessarily tied to permanent geographical spaces. People come together for specific purposes in specific places at specific times. The community represented by the National Reading Conference (NRC) is a good example of a community constituted not by geographical space but by common interest. Such a convergence of people with a common interest (Macz, 1992) can constitute a non-geographical community, although such a community is shaped by the particular geographical or physical space in which the members congregate. Think of how different the n.e.c. community might be, for example, if the annual meetings were held in schools rather than at resorts. The people who would converge might not be different, but the interests, concerns, and practices, as forged by the particular tools available in the physical space, might look very different.

Finally, the growth of electronic forms of communication, such as listserv and chat rooms, signals a need to reconstruct a sense of community as a geographic space. Are these interest groups who meet in cyberspace, but may never meet face to face, communities? Allan Luke (in press) argues

of conceptions of community in public health research, how researchers and reformers conceptualize community does matter in regard to the decisions they make about how to proceed with community interventions.

In literacy research, researchers have used findings from community-based work to generate what they hope is culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, and in many cases these curricula and pedagogies have been extremely successful (e.g., Au & Kawakami, 1994; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). But as Saris (1993) and Obidah (1998) have demonstrated, building culturally relevant or responsive curriculum and pedagogy is a complex process, especially in diverse classroom settings. As Saris observed, the choice of what a teacher considers culturally appropriate texts or literacy practices—often derived from research in the community—might in fact exacerbate marginalized students' sense of alienation in the classroom if the texts and corresponding literacy practices do not serve the students' needs or interests. In the case of the Kadhaya Pomu Indians, which Saris (1993) represented, students resisted the teacher's attempts to offer traditional folk tales (e.g., The Slag Woman) by becoming "poor readers, too ignorant to learn," and dropping out by second or third grade (p. 218). Similarly, Obidah illustrated how African American adolescents were frustrated with their teacher's well-intentioned attempt to engage them in what she thought would be a culturally responsive study of African nations.

Chile and her cousin Yolanda taught me a number of similar lessons about what they might think of as relevant or appropriate texts and practices. In more than one interview, for example, Chile and Yolanda both argued that they disliked Chichano literature despite its investment in many aspects of the Salt Lake City Latino community. As Yolanda explained, "My mother keeps giving me these Chico stories to read. I'm sick of it. I want to read, you know, just regular literature for a while." Yolanda's words remind us that people come from multiple—and sometimes competing—communities. Chile and Yolanda, for example, saw the influx of Mexican immigrants as threatening their security, both in terms of their status as Hispanics ("They make Hispanics look bad") and in terms of the availability of jobs and other material resources. They viewed Chichano literature and movements as supportive of this wave of immigrants and not part of the communities of practice or identification. This may not have been evident to a researcher studying them as members of a Hispanic or Latino community. In many ways, both young women were deeply invested in particular aspects of their ethnic communities, but communities—whether geographic, cultural, or psychological—are complex entities that overlap with one another and that change and grow. Culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, then, need to be made equally complex, and we need to have research that highlights the complexity and hybridity of people's lives and communities to guide the construction of such approaches.

When I say "deliberate," I mean that the classroom population is comprised of students from many different cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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in a forthcoming editorial that a number of "tool-based programs that seek to link electronically young people from different communities around the world represent examples of "concentric communities." These concentric communities forge relationships among old and new communities, face-to-face and virtual communities, and real and imagined communities, thereby building knowledge and changing power relations among the members of the groups who interact.

Whatever one decides to count as community, the construct needs to be clearly defined, and we should explicitly discuss how non-geographic groupings overlap and converge with other groupings. Saleebey (1997) offered a perspective on community as "association-based," and provided a helpful way to think about communities:

Associations are local collectivities established through the consent of participating residents that provide a place for people to pursue their interests and concerns using the natural tools and resources in their environment to promote the stories and visions of their community. Associations can have a cultural and ethnic identity, and residents can form them through churches or community-based businesses (e.g., a soccer team or a neighborhood group). What they have in common is their capacity for inclusion, celebration, problem solving, creativity, and the reenactment and restoration of residents' wisdom, lore, narrative, ritual, and story (p. 297).

Thus, the key to establishing community is not geography, culture, age, or some other singular social quality, but is the enactment of many different kinds of relationships - cultural, age-related, gendered, occupational, or other - within a given geographical and physical space that makes available particular tools for making sense of and participating in social practices. Saleebey's definition, however, has the potential to emphasize a positive and homogeneous sense of community that may preclude the examination of equally important practices within particular groups.

A somewhat different construction of community is offered in the network analytic perspective (Widmalm, 1979), which argues that the neighborhood is "only one variety of social network" and that the "community in the urban setting...is no longer a territorial unit, but consists of a variety of linkages among persons sharing common interests or activities" (Olson, 1982). As Bartos and Hamilton (1998) argued, the concept of networks evokes a sense of the social relationships that are enacted to serve certain purposes and meet certain needs. It also implies that the members of a network engage in similar sets of social practices and ways of knowing the world. The concept of networks emphasizes that the interests, needs, relationships, and knowledge of groups of people, in addition to the geographical space they share, shape their sense of community. However, Barton and Hamilton (1998) also argued that like communities and associations, networks can be "expressive, disruptive, or resistant to individuals' needs for change" (p. 16).

Although I ultimately turned to the construct of networks to explain the complicated community served by the bilingual immersion school I described previously, I struggled not only with Barton and Hamilton's concerns about networks, but also with memories of my experiences with Chile, Khel, and their friends. Networks can imply a systemic, a connectedness and simultaneous separateness, and a strategic sense, but the hybridity I witnessed was more embodied and fluid, shifting "between lines and between times and places" (Bhabha, 1994) in less conscious ways than a network perspective implies. Although the concept of hybridity does not have to deny the strategic use of various networks, associations, spaces, or communities, neither is it completely captured in such constructs:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of in-betweenhood - singular or communal - to initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 1-2)

To evoke the sense of fluidity and hybridity that Bhabha suggests, I find Soja's (1996) conception of space - and particularly of "thirdspace" or the articulation of real and imagined physical, cultural, and social spaces - compelling, because it offers possibilities for examining hybrid identities and community relationships that get enacted within particular physical, cultural, and social spaces. Theories of spatiality suggest somewhat less organized and institutionalized constructions of social relationships than do the terms community or network. The advantage of less organized constructions is that they might direct attention toward the less obvious, unsanctioned, and everyday practices of people. Theories of spatiality are not without problems, however. Spaces are never empty of insubstantial and social constraint or of power relations. Nevertheless, the concept of space does move away from the emphasis on only institutionalized, normalized, or accepted practices (employing Pratt's (1993) notion of contact zones and Bizzell's (1982) dialectical discourse communities (see Guerra, 1998) in cooperation with Soja's (1996) conception of space as a resource for linking and shaping multiple relations could offer a complex way of analyzing and articulating in print what it means to be a member of many different communities simultaneously. As Luke and Luke (1995) argued,
the field does not yet have a discourse for analyzing and writing about relational differences and how those differences shape the lives and literacies of people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This is troubling because our curricular initiatives therefore tend to be essentialized and homogeneous (Luke & Luke, 1999), especially when taken up in large school settings.

Finally, as I have mentioned previously, Moll and González’s (1994) phrase, “circles of kinship and friendship,” which they used in reference to important community relationships, jumped out at me as a phrase that was evocative of the kinds of relationships that the word community signifies, but one that was not, perhaps, as loaded with assumptions about the homogeneity and uniformity. Although the phrase maintains a generally positive sense, the plural “circles” allows for the possibility of multiple and overlapping relations within community frameworks. To Moll and González’s phrase, I have added the words, “position and power” to signify that social groupings, whether circles, networks, or associations, both require and maintain certain positioning and power relations that literacy researchers need to understand if they are to understand and draw implications from the power of the literacy practices associated with these groups.

It seems clear that any term one might choose would open a whole host of new theoretical and practical problems for literacy research out of school. Nevertheless, considering other possibilities for discussing organized and casual relationships in everyday practice (i.e., associations; networks; spaces; or circles of kinship, friendship, position, and power) may help to highlight the complex nature of communities, the ways in which they overlap, converge, and conflict. Regardless of the term one uses, carefully specifying what one means when talking about a particular group can only serve to strengthen literacy research in multiple sites.

Community-based literacy research needs to continue, but it also needs to continue to develop. We should clarify our metaphors, goals, and definitions as we study and write about communities. We should also commit to studying the complexity and hybridity of communities even as we continue to study what makes particular communities unique and unified. In my future work, I plan to limit my use of the word community to specific geographic spaces, and to examine how within those physical spaces, particular cultural and psychological spaces are constructed as circles of kinship, friendship, position, and power, and how these circles are developed and maintained through literacy and language. Moreover, because these circles may spill over into many different physical spaces, I find it most useful to start, as Elizabeth Noll (1998) did in her study of two American Indian youths, with individuals, and to study the spaces and circles that seem central to their lives. I will be likely to constrain my choice of individual youth/teacher on the basis of a particular geographic space, but then I will walk with these individuals—both metaphorically and literally (Orellana & Hernandez, 1999)—in that space and seek to understand what constitutes circles that matter in their everyday lives.

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ON THE LIMITS OF REFRAming: READING THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES REPORT ON READING

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Jim Gee’s (1999) essay “Reading and the New Literacy Studies: Reframing the National Academy of Sciences Report on Reading” (appearing in the September 1999 issue of JLR), a set of reflections on the report titled Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (National Research Council, 1998), contains a number of misstatements of fact about the report that demand correction. In this response, I address the most important of these before turning to a more substantial commentary on Gee’s reflections.

The nature of the report. On page 395 of his essay, Gee characterizes the report as one “written to and for the government” and states that it is thus “not here to advocate for the return of ... social programs as the key answer to the literacy crisis.” This characterization betrays a lack of understanding of the National Research Council, which sponsored the report, and how it operates, and impugns the motives of the members of the committee that wrote the report. The National Research Council is, indeed, the operating