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Re-Framing Adolescent Literacy Research for New Times: Studying Youth as a Resource

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I analyze various perspectives on adolescence, adolescent literacy, and youth culture to argue that the field of education has not attended adequately to the literacy learning and development of adolescents. Moreover, when researchers and policy makers do attend to adolescent or secondary school literacy, the focus of research or policy is typically on adolescents who struggle with mainstream literacy processes. Drawing from this analysis, I contend that if the field would turn its attention to youth and study how they learn increasingly complex literacy practices required in disciplinary discourse communities, how they reinvent literacies for unique contexts, and how they use literacy as a tool to navigate complex technologies and fragmented social worlds, then all literacy could be expanded. Adolescent literacy researchers cannot stop there, however. We must also continue to examine the contexts of secondary schooling, with a focus on the literacy demands made by different content areas, so that we can support students as they navigate the different discourse practices of their everyday lives, secondary schools, and life beyond formal schooling. The future of adolescent and secondary literacy research, I argue, is in research that examines the connections between the everyday discourses of adolescents and the academic discourses they navigate each day in school.

In this paper I argue that the field of education has not attended adequately to the literacy learning and development of adolescents. When literacy policies are made or when funding proposals are advanced (at least in the United States), youth culture and literacy almost always remains invisible as most funding efforts are directed at either children's early literacy learning or at programs designed to remediate adults who have not had access to literacy instruction (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Vacca, 1998). This lack of attention to youth literacy, across educational theory, research, and policy venues, points to unstated assumptions among theorists and policy makers alike that nothing occurs in the literacy development of youth, that no learning about literacy occurs as youth make use of literacy tools to navigate, resist, construct, and reconstruct popular, academic, and work cultures. When they focus primarily on the literacy learning of children and adults, theorists, researchers, and policy makers, whether professing literacy to be a cognitive process, a social

practice, or a political tool, betray a belief that literacy learning ends in childhood, only to be remediated in adulthood if not learned correctly in the early years.

The lack of attention among policy makers, educators, and even adolescent literacy researchers to the intersections of youth culture, youth literacy practices, and literacy teaching and learning in the disciplines of secondary schools is distressing, in part because such neglect makes invisible the literacy practices of a large segment of the world's population. In fact, popular assumptions, rather than careful research or well-articulated theoretical arguments, tend to dominate perceptions about young people and their literacies (and other practices). Such assumptions, which I discuss in the sections that follow, have significant consequences for our teaching of and interactions with young people in and out of school. It is incumbent upon adolescent or youth literacy researchers to challenge popular assumptions about youth practices and youth literacy in order to refocus educational research and policy on the potentials and possibilities of young people. More importantly, adolescent and youth literacy researchers can make an important contribution to literacy theory and research across the life span by providing careful empirical and theoretical studies of the ways *youth* use and practice literacy to navigate and manipulate both popular culture, academic culture, and the world of work.

I will argue that the lack of attention to youth is not a mere oversight. An analysis of how youth are positioned in educational theory and in popular culture reveals that youth are often dismissed from the literacy education radar screen because it is assumed that their literacies and other practices are confused at best, and troubled or villainous at worst (Males, 1996). Drawing from this analysis, I contend that we need to pay attention to youth, in part to support them in constructing successful and happy adult lives. If we turn our attention to youth and study how they learn increasingly complex literacy practices required in disciplinary discourse communities, how they reinvent literacies for unique contexts, and how they use literacy as a tool to navigate complex technologies and fragmented social worlds, then we might learn more about literacy learning among children and adults. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2000, p.308) argued, "youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, uncharted borderlands along which the global meets the local." Youths' access to and fascination with information technologies, mass media and popular culture, mass transportation, and multiple disciplines of the secondary school provides them with multiple sources of information, contact with people of backgrounds different from theirs, and diverse texts and experiences (Luke & Elkins, 1998). Youth in a postmodern world can hardly help but construct hybrid identities. Thus, to study youth literacy *is* to study the complexity of literacy's power: We can examine, through the study of youths using old literacies and inventing new literacies, how people learn literacy in new situations, use literacy to navigate multiple experiences, and use multiple experiences to construct new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, in press). Further, studying youths's literacy practices allows for an examination of the ways that literacies and identities intersect, the consequences of literacy for a new economy (and vice versa), and the consequences of literacies for a new social order (Gee, in press).

The lack of attention to and the popular assumptions about youth culture and youth literacy are only part of the problem with adolescent literacy research, however. I want to argue that even those educators who focus on adolescents or on secondary schools may be studying the wrong phenomena, or at least incomplete phenomena related to adolescents. We have watched our field shift several times in the last 50 years (Moore & Readence, 2001; O'Brien, Moje, & Stewart, 2001). Work in adolescent literacy began with a focus on teaching and learning strategies designed to scaffold young people in learning from text (or, more specifically, extracting information from text) in secondary school classrooms. As strategies were developed and tested in classrooms, some scholars began to study the social practices of those classrooms (Bloome, 1989; Dillon, 1989; Hinchman & Zalewski, 1996) in an attempt to understand how teachers and students took up the strategies offered by content area reading specialists. More recently, the work of our field has shifted to the study of adolescents in and out of classrooms. Several studies have examined how young people read and write in places other than school (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron, Hughes, & Williams, 2001; Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Finders, 1997; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; Moje, 2000). What we have not done, and where we need to direct our attention in the future, is to examine how youths' literacy practices reflect the intersection of multiple groups (e.g., ethnic groups, youth cultural groups, social class groups, to name just few), and to examine how the knowledges, ways of knowing, and identities they build from those group experiences intersect with the advanced, deep content learning teachers, parents, and administrators expect young people to do in secondary school classrooms. In what follows, I develop these points by discussing a variety of perspectives on adolescence and youth culture and providing examples of the sophistication and complexity of youth literacies. I close with a discussion of what the literacy and educational research can learn from youth literacy studies.

WHO ARE YOUTH?

How one answers the question, Who are youth?, depends on the theoretical perspective scholars take on the time period popularly called teen years, adolescence, or youth. Broadly speaking, youth and their experiences have been examined from two different stances in the field of education. One stance focuses on *adolescence* as a stage or period of development, whereas the second stance examines the experiences and behaviors of youth as part of normed sets of practices, behaviors, and beliefs common to people of a certain age or generation, typically referred to as *youth culture(s)*.

Only in recent years have researchers and theorists in the field of literacy and language education turned to either stance as a way of examining the literacy practices of youth. Prior to the late 1980s, literacy researchers and theorists who studied the literacy learning of youth confined their study to secondary school classrooms and focused their work on the demands made on older literacy learners as they attempted to extract information from content area text. Thus, adolescent and

youth literacy research is a relatively new phenomenon (and the field of secondary school and disciplinary literacy is not much older); however, work in these areas has expanded over the last 20 years to include an important focus on how youth use and learn literacy in multiple spaces and for multiple purposes. This work has drawn largely from psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives on adolescence and, to a lesser extent, from cultural studies of youth.

Adolescence

Both popular notions and theoretical perspectives on adolescence assume a link between biology, or physiological changes, and cognitive and affective changes in young people. G. Stanley Hall (1904) referred to adolescence as a phase of storm and stress resulting from hormonal changes at the onset of puberty. Although the importance of examining the impact of hormonal changes on people's behavior and experience cannot be dismissed (Worthman, 1999), the popular assumption that hormones are *everything* in adolescence leads many parents, teachers, and theorists alike to position youth as nothing more than raging hormones (see Finders, 1998/1999).

Adolescent as raging hormone. The raging hormone model fosters an image of the wild, troubled, sweaty, and lustful teen just looking for action, which promotes a fear of adolescents among parents, researchers, and teachers (Males, 1996). As Finders (1998/1999) argued, a raging hormone perspective is suspiciously pat. It locates the assumed problems of adolescence on something inside the individual that cannot be controlled by teachers or parents. A raging hormone model is also deeply troubling because it plays on and into dichotomies between reason and emotion, suggesting that people are either rational, literate beings, or they are adolescents. It is not surprising, given the hormonal perspective, that attention in the literacy field has been diverted from the cognitive, social, and political practices, including literacy and textual practices, of young people.

However, a number of educational psychologists have taken adolescents, especially middle-years adolescents, seriously. Jacquelyn Eccles and her colleagues have illustrated repeatedly that the contexts of secondary schooling represent a development mismatch for adolescents (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles et al., 1993). Nevertheless, few federally funded educational initiatives are aimed at youth studies, and fewer are aimed at youth literacy studies. More often than not, when adolescent educational policy initiatives have been launched, they have focused either on school violence control or on struggling readers. By and large, a raging hormone discourse reigns supreme, reducing adolescents to people who are out of control, with cognitive and social development, including literacy development, backgrounded to physiological development.

The discourse of adolescent as problem, often attributed to hormonal and other physiological developments, is advanced through a variety of popular cultural media. Television shows, movies, and even news media produce images of adolescents as wild, resistant, and even deviant. For example, a currently popular anti-smoking advertisement in a number of news and domestic living magazines features a split-

page image, in which the image at the bottom of the page (the right-side-up image) is of a winsome young child, with the top image (upside-down) featuring an adolescent wearing non-traditional garb or hair ornaments and a less-than-winsome facial expression. In one version, the captions read, "At 5, they like to play games," and on the adolescent half, "By 14, they like to play deaf." Such images are accompanied by the discourse of "Just wait until they're 13" that many parents of toddlers have heard at one time or another.

Some readers might dismiss these images and comments as harmless. The reasoning is that everyone makes jokes about adolescents, a reasoning that underscores the prevalence of the discourse: Everyone does make jokes about adolescent-as-problem or adolescent-as-out-of-control. Such discourse has consequences, often negative, for the education of youth. And such a discourse supports, and is supported by, the field's lack of research on the power and potential of adolescents or youth. Such a discourse, for example, explains why measures designed to prevent youth conflict rarely include an emphasis on what youth are thinking, reading, and writing about, and why, in some cases, schools and other organizations have begun a surveillance of youths's textual practices (Daiute, in press; Morrill, 2000). According to Males (1996), youth are society's scapegoats, and the raging hormone theory makes them both a convenient explanation and an easy target.

What's more, our failure to analyze carefully how and why youth use and make sense of a wide range of print and mass media texts allows us to accept the raging hormone model of adolescence as an explanation for everything from extreme youth conflict to teen pregnancy. If we looked carefully at all texts available to youth (consider, for example, the conflict represented in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), then we might not be so quick to assume that hormones alone are responsible for how youths resolve conflicts in their everyday lives. If we took seriously the idea that adolescents are sophisticated meaning-makers who use various texts to represent or construct identities and subject positions in the world, then we might not neglect to examine youths's meaning making. We might find that we could learn something important about meaning making through literacy as well.

Adolescence as a time of becoming. Peter Mosenthal (1998) moved beyond the raging hormone model by arguing that adolescence is a relatively new stage in human development (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Kett, 1977; Mosenthal, 1998). Adolescence as a period of development, Mosenthal argued, was spurred by industrialization and the concomitant need to prepare children, via schooling, for a particular kind of workplace. In other words, adolescence, according to such perspectives, is a socially and politically constructed phenomenon, one that by virtue of its social, political, and historical situatedness, needs to be understood as a changing phenomenon. It is worth noting the shift from a focus on the individual biology of the *adolescent*, to a conception of *adolescence* as a developmental period. Even among perspectives that identify the developmental period as biologically or psychologically determined, the focus on the phase, rather than the individual, illustrates an important shift in perceptions about adolescence. And perspectives that

emphasize the socially constructed nature of the developmental period represent a virtual sea change in thinking about young people. At the same time, however, even theories of adolescence as a socially constructed phase tend to emphasize it as a time of *becoming* (Neilsen, 1998), fraught with problems for youth (Mosenthal, 1998).

The problems for adolescents, according to these perspectives, stem from the tensions and dilemmas youth experience as they sample from multiple experiences, in multiple social groups, while becoming adults. This perspective has utility for thinking about the literacy practices of people in this age group because youth do, indeed, experience many different contexts and practices. In fact, one wonders why more focus is not put on how youth use texts and literacies as part of that becoming process. Both the emphasis on *problems* of adolescence and on adolescence as a *phase* may suggest an answer. Because adolescents are considered to be struggling through a phase of life filled with problems, tensions, and dilemmas, their literacy practices, even when acknowledged as worthy of study, are often reduced to artifacts of adolescent confusion, rather than as tools for meaning making, boundary crossing, and agency. The analyses of adolescent literacies in problem-based studies typically revolve around how they use literacy to resolve problems, or, as Mosenthal (1998) argued, how they could be used to manage dilemmas. These studies make important contributions to literacy research because they do illustrate how adolescents navigate different contexts, but they do not necessarily reveal the potential and resourcefulness of youth literacy practices except insofar as they illustrate how youth can manage dilemmas in sophisticated ways.

Youth Culture: An Alternative to Adolescence

To take seriously what youth can teach the field about literacy processes, practices, and identity construction, we need to develop theories that make spaces for youth literacies as powerful and productive tools, and that allow the field to trace how the problematic and violent practices in which youth do engage are often a function of the social, political, and very adult contexts in which they live, work, and learn. Youth cultural studies offer such perspectives.

Youth cultural studies do not deny that young people are engaged in identity representation and development at some level, but such studies typically do not emphasize *becoming*, with a sense of some final, stable end product or identity. Nor do they assume that youths struggle with problems with any more frequency or intensity than do children or adults. Instead, youth culture studies focus on the resources (including literacy practices and textual resources), contexts, and spaces to which youth have access as they live their everyday school and social lives. Such studies examine how youth construct and represent themselves in hybrid ways across different spaces and contexts, and often show how youth conflict or problems are a function of social and political (and adult) contexts. Dwight Conquergood (1994), for example, illustrated that the discourse of loyalty in street gangs parallels the discourse of nationalism and patriotism, and he argued that it is not surprising that youth engage in gang practices, given the national and political contexts in which they are immersed.

Several youth cultural studies examine youths' experience from the perspective of youths, making spaces for youth to tell their own stories, rather than to report stories layered with adult, and often white and mainstream, assumptions about what it means to be a youth. For example, in contrast to the perspective that assumes youth are either naturally violent (all those hormones) or react in violent ways to the tensions of becoming in adolescence, Morrill (2000) presented narrative analyses that demonstrate youths' purposeful reasoning behind the conflicts in which they engage. Arguing for an *elusive* perspective on youth culture, Yon (2000) traced the different roots and routes of youth identities, illustrating that youth represent many different identities, with little confusion or frustration, simultaneously. Davidson (1996) presented cases of individual youth to illustrate how they represent their ethnic, racialized, and gendered identities across a variety of contexts in school.

Literacy and youth culture. Youth cultural work in literacy focuses on how youth use literacy to navigate, synthesize, and hybridize multiple spaces. Such studies also emphasize how literate practice gets complicated and changed by the social and political practices demanded in a globalized, technologized, and hybridized world (Alvermann et al., 2001; Knobel, 1999; Lewis & Fabos, 1999). Such work resists explaining youths's uses of literacy as resistant or deviant acts: My own work, for example, demonstrates that even young people most likely to be engaged in violent practices—gang-connected youth—are actively using texts and literacy practices to make sense of their everyday lives. In fact, their gang-connected literacies, often seen either as deviant (in that case usually not even considered *literacy*) or resistant, were more often than not simply ways of identifying with other youth, getting through the day, or finding a space to belong (Moje, 2000). Camitta (1993), likewise, has illustrated how urban adolescents use vernacular literacies in and out of school to take hold of their lives, to write themselves into the world (cf. Hagood, 2002, this issue; Shuman, 1986). In short, these studies challenge the notion that people simply respond to the conditions around them by resisting or accommodating experiences (Fiske, 1989; Grossberg, 1995). People use popular cultural texts and experiences in unpredictable ways to make sense of and take power in their worlds (Alvermann et al., 2001; Radway, 1984). What's more, close-up studies of youth often show youth to be making productive use of literacy, to be sophisticated users of print and other forms, and even to be kind and generous people who are concerned about making a difference in the world.

Gee offered a useful way to think about the power and importance of youth literacy practices when he talks about youths as "shape shifting portfolio people" (Gee, in press). For Gee, shape-shifting portfolio people actively construct their identities in relation to the multitude of Discourses and cultural models available them via new texts and new experiences in an information-based, globalized, fast capitalist economy. The sense of shape-shifting youth is distinctly different from youth who are at the whim of hormones or who are struggling through the problems of deciding who to become. The youth of Gee's cases are youth who make decisions and create both hybrid and fluid identities that work across and within multiple spaces, times, and places. Following such models, the questions relevant to literacy

and educational theory become what role literacy plays in this shape shifting, and what we can learn about both literacy and youth if we attend to these hybrid, shape shifting practices? Moreover, how do new literacies and types of texts get invented as youths engage in shape shifting? What are the implications for children's and adults' literacy learning?

Despite an emphasis on conceptualizing literacy as a tool for changing thought and experience, when people, whether they be the popular media, school personnel, or educational scholars, speak of the literacy practices of *youth*, they rarely talk about such literacies as *tools*. Indeed, there is little public talk about youth or adolescent literacy at all. If we want to claim that literacy is a tool for transforming thought and experience, then literacy theorists and researchers need to extend that theoretical claim to all people's literacy practices by asking what various non-school literacy practices *do* for young people as everyday practices, as ways of getting through the day, and as ways of supporting their in-school learning. Youth offer a unique possibility for studying the power of literacy. Youth are in the position to make a number of interesting choices among texts, experiences, and practices. Youth in the millennial world lie in the "inbetween of global and local spaces" (Bhabha, 2001). It is in the inbetween that new forms of cultural production, new texts and new literacies, are constructed.

If we acknowledge that youth's literacies are tools, then we need to ask what are the cognitive consequences of the particular literacy and textual tools privileged by adolescents, such as popular cultural texts, electronic technologies, and unsanctioned peer groups and practices? What are the social, political, and economic consequences of these texts and experiences? What do these consequences mean for deep content learning at advanced levels of study in secondary schools? And, for the entire field, what can these consequences, and an in-depth study of how youth enact these literacies across global and local spaces, times, and places, teach us about children's and adult's literacy learning?

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM YOUTH LITERACY STUDIES

In addition to the fact that youth are virtually invisible in our national discourse on literacy and that when they are visible they are often represented as problems, there are at least four other compelling reasons for studying the literacy practices of youth, each of which has to do with the specialized knowledges, experiences, or skills we can learn about by studying older learners who can articulate a great deal about their own thinking and learning. First is the simple argument that we can obtain greater access to complex thinking about literacy and text by working with youth. Second, because youth typically have more independent free time with peers than do children (whose activities are usually mediated and regulated by adults), youth have more opportunities to construct new and different literacy practices and to read and write a wider range of texts than do children. Third, youth attend secondary schools, and there is much that we need to know about how to support young people in navigating the multiple discourse communities represented in the

secondary school. Finally, youth because they have access to so many different experiences and discourse communities can help literacy researchers understand the relationship between identity construction or representation and literacy practices with different texts. More detailed discussion of each of these points follows.

Access to Complex Thinking about Literacy and Text

On a most basic level youth are more metacognitive than children. That is, they are better able to analyze and self-report on their uses of print and other forms of representation in different spaces and places. Youth can explain what they do not understand and can often trace why they struggle to understand, typically offering commentaries such as, "The text wasn't interesting," "I don't know anything about the topic," "I didn't understand these words," "It was boring," "The teacher didn't connect it to our lives," "I don't understand how these theories developed."

On a more complex level, youth can engage with the research they participate in quite differently than can children. Sutherland (in press), for example, described her experience working with young African American women as they read Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1972), in their high school English literature course. While interviewing focus participants, the young women advised Sutherland to read Sister Souljah's, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999). They told Sutherland that Sister Souljah's text was more representative than *Bluest Eye* of their literacy learning and identities and urged her to read the text so that they could discuss it with her and so that she could understand their experiences in the world, not just in school, more fully. This discussion extended beyond merely identifying Souljah's work as good or interesting. The girls pointed out to Sutherland that they would not recommend this text to their mothers; they wanted Sutherland to read it as a research tool for understanding them because they saw it as a tool for understanding, questioning, and positioning themselves in the world. The level of metacognition, self-awareness, and discursive power represented in these young women is seldom represented in studies with young children. However, a close analysis of youth's reasoning about texts such as is represented in Sutherland's study can teach literacy researchers and educators a great deal about how all ages of people, including children, youth, and adults, make decisions about text choice and how texts serve as tools for identity construction and social action.

Independent Peer-Group Activity

As previously stated, youth have a great deal of independent time outside of school, quite likely more independent time than do children (and, in some cases, even more than adults who are working) to pursue different uses of literacy and different forms of representation. Because they engage in and with many different forms and different literacy practices, studying how youth use literacy can reveal in more precise and complex ways than in child study the power and problems people have with print and other forms of representation. We can study how youth who struggle with basic processes of decoding and encoding print, for example, use other

forms of representation to navigate the context of school, home, community, and urban landscape. Alvermann (2001), for example, illustrated the *Pokemon* proficiencies of one young man who was deemed a struggling reader. The young man combined print texts with other icons, images, numbers, and oral language to construct sophisticated understandings of complex instructions for playing *Pokemon*; his teacher was amazed to learn that he could follow and teach the rules to others, an insight that changed the teacher's assumptions about his literacy potential.

In my research I am continually reminded of young people's strategic uses of other forms of representation as they navigate urban areas with ease and yet appear to struggle with formal print texts in school. I watch youth who seem unmotivated to read books in school devouring books out of school. I listen to youth who seem unable to spell conventional words in school as they teach me the complicated rules for tagging up a wall down the street from the school (or on the school). I watch youth use drumming, dance, and dress to send complicated messages to one another about who they are and who they want to be. I listen to them comparing types of texts, and at times dismissing texts that progressive educators exhort teachers to offer. Such interactions, often in settings unmediated by adults, underscore the crucial importance of motivation and context to literacy prowess and learning.

Perhaps more important, I watch youth engaging in the skills that Guthrie and Metsala (1999) argued are necessary for high reading achievement: integrating information across multiple texts, relating textual meanings to personal experience, and composing complete messages in the form of stories and reports for actual audiences. And yet the available standardized assessments of youths' literacy skills suggest that youth struggle with these skills. Why is there such a disparity in what we observe youth doing in ethnographic studies with literacy outside of school, as they engage with particular kinds of texts, and what we observe them doing in formal, standardized, constrained literacy activities? We need more research, preferably using a variety of methods, with different youth, across multiple contexts, to document what young people can do with texts.

Studying Learning in the Multiple Discourse Communities of the Secondary School

Youth attend secondary schools, where students move from discipline to discipline in ways that reify divisions between the boundaries. The structure of secondary schools, then, introduces complexity to literacy learning and use and thus offers the possibility for studying how people make sense of the school-based disciplines and the literacy practices privileged in them. In my own research in a high-school chemistry class (Moje, 1996), white, middle-class high school sophomores and juniors delineated clearly between the kind of writing and reading done for chemistry class and that done for English class (as did their teacher).

By contrast, in my research with predominantly white, middle-class seventh-grade English students, I found that the middle-school youth were less articulate about the differences between the disciplines, although they did have strong notions about what one should learn in English class (Moje, Willes, & Fassio, 2000). In

another middle-school study, however, Latino/a seventh-grade science students followed to the letter their teacher's instructions to, "Write a story about what would happen if a factory opened in your community," and, to the teacher's chagrin, neglected to include any aspects of the scientific study in which they had engaged, suggesting that they had not yet incorporated conceptions of the disciplinary discourse into their writing for class assignments (Moje, Collazo, Carrillo, & Marx, 2001).

Few studies of youth have demonstrated proficiency among youth on the fourth dimension of high reading achievement outlined by Guthrie and Metsala (1999), that of using text knowledge, or even personal experience, to evaluate science observations or historical documents. Are youth not engaging in these practices, or are youth literacy studies not examining these practices and skills? Initial data analyses in my own current work suggest that youths draw from popular cultural texts not only to evaluate, but also to construct scientific and historical knowledge (Moje, Ciechanowski, & Athan, 2001). How are popular cultural texts such as the movie, *Erin Brockovich* (Grant, 2000), for example, merging with and reshaping texts written by scientists, news media, community action groups, and legal groups? Are hybrids of popular cultural, community knowledge, and academic knowledge valuable? What impact do they have on youths' school success? More research in this area is needed to advance youth literacy theory and content area learning for all age groups.

Expanded access to how and when youth think about the disciplines and the literacy practices that make sense or are demanded in the disciplines could further our understanding of literacy as socially, culturally, and even politically constructed sets of practices for people of all ages. Literacy theorists can also compare the literacy beliefs and practices of adult professionals in the disciplines with those of youth in secondary schools to examine how schooled disciplinary literacy practices prepare, or do not prepare, people for the work of the professions. Such insights are not available in the study of children's or adults' literacies alone; we must have more detailed studies of youth's disciplinary literacy practices as a point of comparison and further theorizing about how the discipline, and the inbetween spaces of the disciplines construct and shape literacy practices. Such work would also help us reframe adolescent literacy research to connect what we are beginning to understand in more complex ways, adolescents' identities as readers and writers, to the learning of deep conceptual knowledge in the content areas. We need to better understand the discourses of the content areas, and how young people understand those discourses if we are to make connections between adolescent literacy and secondary school or content-area literacy.

Studying Identity Construction and Representation

Finally, through studies of adolescents using literacy, the link between literate practice and identity construction and representation can be glimpsed, in part because adolescents can be more metacognitive about their practices and in part because adolescents are inbetween multiple spaces. Whether or not one agrees with

the concept of adolescence as a time of *becoming*, youth are popularly construed as being between many spaces: childhood and adulthood; work and play; home, school, peer group, and community; romance and sex; popular culture and academic culture; science class, history class, and English class; comic book and internet; and local community and global marketplace. The list of inbetweens goes on and on. In general, young people have access to a wide range of funds of knowledge at school, home, work, community-based organizations, and peer groups, and sometimes out of their local communities.

Take, for example, the instance I observed recently of a group of Latina/o students from low-income homes, many of whom are recent arrivals to the U.S., as they traveled to an affluent suburb of their larger urban community to visit a Holocaust museum at the Jewish Community Center in that suburb. I watched as the youth were told that the immense and beautifully appointed building (complete with swimming pool and full-sized gymnasium) was the equivalent of a YMCA, or, more probably for these youth, their Latino Family Services building. I watched them gaze upon and turn their faces from the images of the Holocaust, the faces of malnourished and abused men, women, and children. I listened with them as a survivor told them of living in the Polish ghetto and being forced into labor for the Russians. All the while, I wondered how they made sense of these experiences in the context of their own urban communities, their own migration from other countries, and their own experiences of racism and classism. I wondered what it was like to go back to homes where their parents had not encountered these same images. Did they discuss the experiences with their parents? Did they draw on their teachers' understandings as resources for sense-making?

School-funded field trips are not the only source of youths' access to multiple experiences; with access to media technologies in an increasingly technologized world, combined with more time than adults to peruse such technology funds, youth have access to more information, more art, more cultural forms, more funds of knowledge, and more people than do young children or adults. As I stood with them in the halls of the Holocaust museum, I wondered how they integrated their trip to the Holocaust museum with accompanying classroom readings of a biography of Thurgood Marshall, *Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank et al., 1989), a 1-page chronology of the colonial and early American slave trade, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), and with out-of-school literacy practices of surfing the Internet, reading in summer book programs, or community organization drama performances. How did the Holocaust museum texts intersect with their textual and physical experiences in school, usually mediated by adults, and with their out-of-school, typically mediated by parents, community leaders, and, quite often, by peers?

As youth engage in these texts, practices, and experiences, they read, write, and speak themselves into the texts, and they construct new texts of experience for themselves. These youth, by virtue of their unique position in society, encounter contradictory and global practices that younger siblings have not yet experienced and that their parents (most of whom could not afford the time or money to take such a trip) may never experience. They construct new selves that are hybrids of all of

these experiences, while simultaneously identifying with both Latino/a communities in the U.S. and their countries of origin, with both peers and parents, with both popular cultural icons and local role models. They reconcile vastly different belief systems, telling me, for example, that although they definitely believe in *brujeria* (mysticism) in their countries of origin, they do not believe that witches and ghosts inhabit their U.S. communities.

A middle-school student's notebook provides a particularly telling artifact of this merging of the contradictory texts of youths' experiences: Flipping through the notebook one finds a prime number chart on one page, a particularly graphic gang graffiti on another, and a religious crossword puzzle completed for his elective seminary classes. Words such as *heaven*, *carнал*, and *sin* cohabit, with little apparent contradiction, the same space as an image of a gangsta flipping off the world (Moje, Thompson, Christiansen, & Zeitler, 1997). Such hybrid beliefs and practices are fed by multiple, diverse, and contradictory experiences and require sophisticated literacy practices and processes of integration, synthesis, and analysis, much like those Guthrie and Metsala (1999) highlighted. If we could better understand how these experiences are integrated by youth, we might be able to make better connections from young people's everyday learning to their in-school, academic learning. We might also be able to support them in integrating the complex texts of the secondary school content areas.

Because youth are often viewed as being in the process of becoming adults, they are often treated in different ways from children. Contrary to what intuition might have us believe, this treatment of young people is often more controlling than the treatment of children (Eccles et al., 1991), and yet young people invent ways, using literacies in the process, to manipulate and reshape the controls placed on them. In the process, argue many adolescent literacy scholars, youth develop *new* literacies, literacies of attention, navigation, and critique that are unique to a global and technologized world (Knobel & Lankshear, in press; Lankshear & Knobel, in press; Lewis & Fabos, 1999). Drawing from their work with teen 'zine (magazine) writers, Michelle Knobel and Colin Lankshear argued that "young people are not held necessarily in a 'consumer trance' unaware or without sophisticated critical capacities."

Youths use texts and particular literacy practices in ways that position them as powerful in certain spaces (Oates, 1998) or that allow them to claim membership in certain groups (Finders, 1997; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; Moje, 2000). These young people move throughout any number of seemingly contradictory practices in a single day, bringing to and taking away from those practices various literacy practices and various texts. Bhabha (1994) argued that we should study these inbetween spaces to understand more about how people make identities. We need to study literacy practices in these inbetween spaces to understand more about conventional literacy processes and about how new literacies are invented and transformed in hybrid spaces. Studying youth culture and literacy practices can reveal the sophisticated purposes for literacy that all people bring to literacy practice, purposes that can be

incorporated into the teaching of multiliteracies, as advocated by the New London Group (1996).

STUDYING YOUTH AS A RESOURCE: SOME CONCLUSIONS

Why study adolescent literacy, youth culture, and youth literacies? To fail to study youth literacies is to support narrow conceptions of what it means to learn and use literacy, which perpetuates the problem of studying only the struggles, rather than the potentials, of youth. The lack of focused attention to the literacies of youth in educational policy and theory reveals something about the dominant assumptions in the field, regardless of currently popular conceptions of literacy that many scholars espouse. That is, despite arguments about the complex nature of literacy that abound in the field, and despite calls for broadened conceptions of literacy, the neglect of youth literacies makes clear that literacy as a construct remains rooted in narrow conceptions of schooled, basic literacy processes that assume that literacy learning ends in childhood.

The focus on adult literacy campaigns and research in education appears to be based on the assumption that the adults who need literacy education need it because they failed to learn literacy in childhood. Even this stance, however, raises the question of why we continue to neglect the literacy development of adolescents. A conception of literacy that assumes literacy learning ends in childhood would suggest a need to attend to the children who do not learn basic print literacy by the time that they move into adolescence. And yet, little funding is designated even for the study of so-called struggling readers. By and large, the field continues to focus on early childhood or adult literacy, allowing the span of years between childhood and adulthood to remain an unattended void. Our neglect also allows society to devalue and, in some cases, vilify youth.

In addition to these social and political arguments for the need to attend to a group who constitutes a significant portion of the world's population, adolescent literacy theorists and researchers do not understand youth literacy development or practices well enough, especially when we are faced with the question of how to connect youths' out-of-school literacies and cultural practices, which appear to be highly motivating and an important resource for their in-school meaning making, to their in-school literacy learning in various content areas. Literacy educators do not know as much as we could about how to develop curricula and pedagogy that can support the academic literacy learning of young people by drawing on the literacies they skillfully practice in everyday life. Adolescent literacy researchers have begun to turn our attention to the cultural and literate practices of youth, but we now need to theorize and study how to integrate discourse communities, how to teach youth to traverse those communities, and how to support teachers and administrators as they work within institutional contexts that often devalue the everyday literacy practices of youth.

Finally, the entire literacy field is missing a prime opportunity to learn not only *about* youth literacy but also *from* youth as they teach us about how complex literacy

processes and practices develop and change in multiple contexts, times, and spaces. Until we include youth in general literacy theory (with the funding to assist our research and theorizing), we will continue to develop incomplete theories of literacy learning, development, and practice, and we will overlook a group of people with much to offer educational theory and the world.

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