Research into literacy published in journals such as the *Journal of Literacy Research* spans a range of disciplines and areas of study (e.g., reading, English education, composition). Even individual studies frequently take up interdisciplinary perspectives (e.g., anthropological, sociological, linguistic, educational, textual). The results are journals far ranging in their reach and rich in the knowledge they bring to literacy issues. However, such diversity of theoretical perspectives, research methods, and analytical methodologies also contributes to a confounding effect. In this article, we explore one such effect that occurs when a common term is used with different meanings. Although this may appear on the surface to be a problem easily remedied or even a rather trivial issue, in this article, we show just how consequential this practice can be when the goal is building knowledge from research that can inform practice, policy, and theory. This critical issue can be posed as a set of interrelated questions: Are we all talking about the same thing when we use words like *literacy, reading*, and even seemingly less resonant ones like *context*, the one addressed in this commentary? If we are, how do we know? And if we are not, what price are we paying for not considering the issue?
Framing the Question

This question arose first within our own research community, The Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, whose teachers, graduate students, and university-based researchers work interactively to examine the relationship of literacy practices to student learning across discipline areas (Dixon & Green, 1993). Working in various collaborative relationships over the last 8 years, our members found that they needed to develop and hold stable a common conceptual understanding and definitions of key concepts to conduct their collaborative investigations across classrooms and levels of schooling (grades 1–12). Without this common language and conceptually consistent approach to the study of literate practices in and across classrooms, the comparative analyses across ethnographic studies undertaken since 1991 would not have been possible (e.g., Green & Dixon, 1993; Tuyay, Jennings, & Dixon, 1995). Further, we found that as new members joined us, they brought with them meanings for terms used in our research community that often differed from ours, leading to problems in communication, and at times, relationships.

When such problematic situations occurred in our research community, we were able to explore what was contributing to these problems and examine the consequences for our work and for communicating our work to others. We were also able to negotiate meanings and to reestablish relationships among members of the project. As we show in this Critical Issues commentary, such processes and practices are not visible across groups at the national level, leaving the differences unexamined and the consequences of this inattention invisible. Thus, although the differences in language and use of terms within our own project reinvigorated what has become an inevitable and necessary ongoing dialogue about how particular languages shape both what can be known and how it is known, we have found little evidence of this type of dialogue at the national level, often suggesting fragmentation to those outside the literacy field, like policymakers and practitioners, looking in.

It is not merely a matter of dialogue. We need to understand each other’s positions and what each contributes to a dialogue. It is a matter of understanding where our findings are complimentary, the same, or contradictory, and when they are contradictory, comprehending the reasons. We also need to understand if we hold the same view of the phenomena. Those occasions when views are different are the times to consider the consequences of recommendations we make or actions we take. In this commentary, we suggest making such considerations possible by clearly defining terms and revisiting them from time to time to keep them explicit. Without doing so, we will not understand what the differences are and what differences those differences make. Rather than a dialogue among subdisciplines, literacy discourse that continues to exclude definitions of terms will sound more like a Tower of Babel.

Our concern for a dialogue about differences does not mean that we be-
lieve all researchers who use terms such as context can agree on a single definition. Rather, we agree with Duranti and Goodwin (1992), who recently edited an interdisciplinary book titled Rethinking Context, that a shared definition may not be possible or, in some instances, even desirable. We also agree with them that we need to juxtapose the differences in key concepts or terms (i.e., context in this review; literacy, teaching, and learning among others that often lack specific definition in studies) to compare and contrast the differences and to create syntheses across traditions when possible. Without such understandings of the differences in use, the knowledge potential of the studies using the same term remains fragmented, and the power of the findings examined through this concept remains unrealized.

The consequences of lack of definition and comparative examination of the use of context became visible in what we found in a comparative study of the term context across three major research journals: Research in the Teaching of English (RTE), Reading Research Quarterly (RRQ), and Journal of Literacy Research (JLR). In brief, our analysis of 5 years of studies in the first two journals (1989–1993) and of one issue in the third (1996) showed that the most consistent finding reported across the studies was that context makes a difference. Yet, when we tried to examine what was meant by context, we found that the authors often left the term undefined theoretically, electing to use modifiers as a means of defining this term (e.g., democratic context, textual context, or surrounding context). This led us to conclude that although context makes a difference, we could not provide teachers, policymakers, or others with a clear understanding of what is meant by context so they could assess how their own context was similar or different from the one studied. In the sections that follow, we provide evidence for this claim and a discussion of why readers should be concerned with the diversity of definitions and uses.

Why Context?

Our selection of context as the focal term for the investigation that resulted in this commentary was instigated by visiting Australian scholar Annette Patterson (James Cook University). She was interested in understanding how we defined a concept fundamental to our interactional ethnographic methodology in relation to others in our field. From her poststructural perspective and her focus on gender issues, she questioned how we defined context, how our definition influenced our methodology, and how such uses related to the definitions and methods used by others with similar research interests. Annette’s question resonated with ones that had arisen among members of our research group as we planned, analyzed, and wrote together. Such questions emerged from and prompted conversations about how research language is tied to conceptual frames
and implicates particular ranges of actions that need to be held constant across joint activities, topics, or foci.

Another impetus for this cross-journal study resulted from a series of invitations to participate in colloquia on theory-method relationships at different research meetings in 1994, the first of which occurred during Annette Patterson’s visit: The annual meetings of the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. To explore theory-method relationships, we selected the official research journal of each of these organizations as a reflection of a particular field or intellectual ecology (Toulmin, 1972) to examine the theory-method issue across literacy fields. The presentation of these findings at different research meetings led to the invitation to submit this Critical Issues article. However, given the delay in time between completing the original comparative study and reporting the data in this commentary, we decided to see whether the findings of and issues raised by our initial study applied to current work published in JLR, or whether they were historically bound. To this end, we added an analysis of the then most recent issue of JLR (1996, Vol. 28, No. 3). This analysis, as we show in following sections, supports the findings from the earlier analyses and provides further support for the issues we raise through the discussion of these comparative analyses.

Our approach to examining these questions was to hold context constant in order to locate each explicit use of this term, to examine what could be known about the role of context in literacy instruction, and to explore whether there was agreement in how scholars in various disciplines and from different methodological traditions were using this concept. Even more central to the goals of our study, we elected to examine the term because our review of key journals in literacy revealed that context is frequently used across a number of articles from different theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Initially, we assumed that the findings of our study would be related to two factors: theoretical or methodological differences within a research tradition, and differences due to disciplinary foci and interests across traditions. We discovered, however, that these factors only partially explained the differences we found; an outcome that we, and those to whom we presented the findings, found surprising and provocative. In the sections that follow, we share these factors and discuss how they contribute to the issues we find problematic.

Why Be Concerned?

In this commentary, we raise two concerns, both of which materialized from our comparative study. The first concern addresses the emergence of literacy as a scholarly field. We ask, if literacy is to be a disciplinary field in educational research, then should we not understand how we are constructing ourselves as a field through the language we use? The second concern focuses on the theory-method relationship issue. We question an apparent trend among studies to at-
tend more to explaining their methodology than to presenting the theory that informs it.

First, we raise the issue of language use for talking about what counts as a disciplinary field. Language may be viewed as central to discussions and perceptions of field identity and membership. One illustration is provided by the change in the title of this journal from the *Journal of Reading Behavior* to the *Journal of Literacy Research*. Changing two words is an act full of meaning. It may be read as an indication of how National Reading Conference members see their intellectual community as having evolved in terms of its members’ interests and research foci, and as valuing the importance of language in representing this evolution. From this reading, one possible interpretation is that the field is drawn larger and more complexly. Subdisciplines (e.g., reading, English education) with their attendant approaches provide a wider range of theories and methodologies brought to bear on a larger variety of foci and questions defined as literacy issues. There are more theories – more conceptual perspectives (i.e., principles and assumptions) articulated by researchers in their languages of explanation and description – and there are more methodologies – more logics of inquiry (Birdwhistell, 1977) within which researchers apply their tools and techniques to the processes and practices of their studies. This evolution, concretely marked by an evolution in language, raises the first question: If literacy is to be a disciplinary field within educational research, is it not necessary for us to understand how the languages we use create a base or define subdisciplines within that field?

The importance of our understanding the use of languages within the field of literacy research is underscored by prior scholarly dialogues about the historic rise and delineation of research language within research cultures. Bazerman (1988) has written extensively about how the discourses of science distinguish it as a discourse community distinct from other scholarly traditions and disciplines like, for example, literary criticism. In addition, within the constellation of scientific discourses, it is possible to speak of the discourses of medicine (Mishler, 1984), of behaviorists (Strike, 1974), of the sciences (Kelly, Carlsen, & Cunningham, 1993; Lemke, 1990; Toulmin, 1972), of different schools of psychology (Cushman, 1991), and of traditions within education, among others.

Philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1972), in his study of the history of science, found no single science, but rather sciences that formed communities of practice (e.g., biology, chemistry), which he called intellectual ecologies. These ecologies, he argued, shape what can be known, what counts as appropriate action, and through this what counts as science. He posited that a community’s intellectual ecology provides a field within which a range of intellectual innovations is possible. He reminded us that ideas do not spring forth as though through spontaneous generation. New ideas emerge from ideas already available within the group’s conceptual ecology (Kelly & Green, 1998; Strike & Posner, 1992):

What makes it worthwhile to extend ecological terminology from organic to intellectual evolution is, simply, the extensive parallels between the ecological
account of organic change and the disciplinary account of intellectual development. Within intellectual history, any actual problem-situation creates a certain range of opportunities for intellectual innovation. The range of these opportunities depends, of course, as much on the character of other co-existing ideas as it does on purely “external” features of the social or physical situation. (Toulmin, 1972, p. 316)

The “character” of coexisting ideas is expressed in and through language as realized in the various genres of discourse among members in scholarly communities. The languages or terminologies of sciences, therefore, become important for their power to stand as the representation of constellations of intellectual or theoretical orientations. (Further explanation of the relationship between conceptual perspectives and language use can be found in Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The character of ideas of a scholarly community as expressed in its language becomes the ground from which new ideas are articulated. In its language choices and uses, a community not only articulates into existence its own intellectual identity among its discourse members, but it also implicates its future conceptual field. The opportunities for investigation provided by today’s languages create tomorrow’s ways and means of study.

Another way of seeing the character of a field of ideas realized through the languages in which it is articulated is provided by philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1981), who applied the hermeneutic lens from textual studies to the discourse of human sciences to explore how understandings are made within them. Hermeneutics, the art or science of text interpretation, has occupied many of the best philosophical minds of the century (e.g., Heidegger, Bultmann, Derrida, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Nietzsche), who have aimed to understand understanding itself to produce a theory of what happens whenever we do understand something. Ricoeur’s particular theorizing about research languages and their uses provides a conceptual frame for viewing the multiplicity of phenomena we are defining as the “objects” of literacy research investigation.

Ricoeur (1981) raised a seminal issue about the relationships between how we know we know and how we know what we know (i.e., epistemology versus ontology), and the actions we take based on these conceptual relationships. In presenting how meanings and subsequent related actions emerge from textual language, Ricoeur posited that the question to be asked is no longer “How do we know?” but rather “What is the mode of being of that being who exists only in understanding?” (p. 54) When language is looked at through Ricoeur’s hermeneutic lens, understanding is central. Understanding, which emerges from the interpretation of language used to construct meaning, creates phenomena, the creation of which leads to our decisions about ways of dealing with them.

Viewed in this way, understanding is complex and inherently problematic. Because postmodern philosophy has posited multiple understandings from multiple positions using multiple voices, then the phenomena or “beings” that can be conceived, described, acted on, and understood are also multiple. Language becomes the instrument through which we position and define our
knowing, as well as the identity of that which we know and our methodology for making the connection. Ricoeur’s perspective makes us aware of the critical and problematic role language plays in not only the creation and ongoing regeneration of social sciences as disciplines and subspecialties, but also in the daily decision making of social scientists themselves, in their conceptualizations of what actions they think are important, and in their decisions about which ones to take.

A voice from another scientific discourse community, Philip Cushman (1991) in psychology, has more recently noted a related concern for our understimating or undervaluing the invisible power of an intellectual culture to shape research knowledge and its application both for the present and for the future:

Many writers (e.g., Smedslund, 1985; Toulmin, 1986) have demonstrated that a culture delineates which topics are important to study, which in turn influence the overall strategy of the study, which in turn influences what is proper data, which in turn influences how the data are collected and analyzed. Smedslund argued that social science affirms the indigenous psychology of the culture because its hypotheses and findings are reflexive – that is, they are “necessary” and “true” from the outset. Knowledge production is, therefore, a child of its era. It is an artifact of its time and is related to and in various ways and unknowingly serves a particular constellation of power and privilege of that era. (p. 207)

His argument suggests that the choice of language by members of a particular tradition places limits on what can be discussed and what aspects can be described in and through that language. His argument also suggests that the choice of language, with all of its related conventions for use, inscribes a particular view and set of understandings about the phenomena under study, in other words, what can be known. (For a related discussion from a critical linguistics point of view see Fairclough, 1989, 1995, who raises questions about the relationship between language and power.)

To bring home to educational research these ideas about the constitutive and contingent power of language used by members of a discipline in discourse communities to construct particular views of educational phenomena, processes, and practices through their discourse, we turn to the work of Strike (1974). In his analysis for the American Educational Research Journal of behaviorist theory and practices, Strike illustrated the significance of understanding what he termed “the expressive potential” of the language of educational research. Strike argued that the particular vocabulary of behaviorism was overly restrictive in that “there were meaningful and possibly true assertions about educational goals and methods which cannot be asserted in its vocabulary” (p. 104). Strike’s analysis of the expressive potential of behaviorist language makes possible an examination of the expressive potential of the language of other educational discourse communities. Consequently, the concept of expressive potential serves as a way of looking at how the particular language used (e.g., behaviorist, sociocultural) shapes what counts as research questions, methods,
and ultimately as research about literacy both within and across educational discourse communities.

In light of the expressive potential in language to shape the thinking and the objects of study of our research discipline and the multiplicity of subspecialties within it, the second concern emerges. If what can be known is what can be articulated, then a reflexive concern for understanding our own lenses, processes, and procedures and those of our research colleagues through the languages in which they are represented becomes important. Not to observe what it is we make and how we make it in relation to each other is to unnecessarily limit powerful insights into what can be known and how it can be explored. To engage in this reflexive action, we need to be able to put on the conceptual lenses made available through the language of theory to observe the language of inquiry or methodology. When inquiry processes and procedures are articulated without the lenses through which to view them, that is, when methods and methodology are not explained in terms of conceptual theories that define them, understanding their significance can be compromised.

This second concern about the need for more theorized methodologies and methodologized theories in research was raised two decades ago by Ray Birdwhistell (1977). It is cogently realized in a response he gave his students when they questioned him about whether Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson had a methodology:

I have come to the conclusion that the past 25 years have seen a separation of theory from methods of research procedure. This tendency becomes manifest in the choice and analysis of import of the problem, in the location of the observation site, in the preliminary isolation of data, in the development of relevant, consistent and explicit techniques of observation, in the recording and storage of data, in the orientation of rules of evidence, and finally in the methods of data and evidence assessment and presentation that permit and assist in ordering reexamination and research. (pp. 104–105)

Birdwhistell alerts us to the dangers of theory-method separation; when theory is separated from method, the conceptual basis for defining terms is divorced from their applied use. When dialogues about research studies are dominated by interest in methods, procedures, and findings separate from theoretical conceptualizations of conceptual terminology used in their application, the possibility of confusion and distortion increases. In addition, when the relationship between theory and method is invisible and not explicit, it is unavailable for those reading the study who were not members of the original research team. Without definition of terms, readers of studies assume meanings from their own conceptual points of reference or from what they suppose the writer’s are.

In summary, through the lens of language as it articulates a scholarly field, we members of an intellectual ecology, the research community of JLR readers and contributors, are language makers and users engaged in discourse dialogues
about our work in literacy study, for whom language serves as the prime instrument for constructing, representing, enacting, and applying our research. Such activity, because of its interpretive nature, because we come from diverse theoretical and methodological positions, and because we have different disciplinary foci and interests, creates tensions. Each of us must read across traditions and their varied theories, disciplines, and interests to render our own serviceable theories of literacy. Although usefully juxtaposing findings from disparate literacy studies presents a potentially richly meaningful representation, the task of reading across them is challenging. The challenge is made more difficult when there is a tendency among researchers, noted by Birdwhistell, to present the methods, procedures, and subsequent findings of research in texts that incorporate key operant terms without accompanying definition and conceptual positioning.

The Comparative Study

In this section, we illustrate Birdwhistell’s contention that lack of theoretically grounded terms in reporting studies exacerbates an already difficult process. Through three linked studies, we examined whether different literacy research traditions (as represented in the discourse of their dominant journals) were in agreement as to the meaning of a commonly used term. As indicated previously, we selected what, at the time of data collection, were the previous 5-years worth of publications of RRQ (1989–1994) and RTE (1989–1994). We employed an ethnographic approach to our research that, by holding questions and analysis strategies constant, allowed for differences in content and methods across journals and articles.

The anthropological and sociolinguistic framework we used for our study provided a way of viewing written text as a cultural artifact of a particular intellectual community, allowing us to see what is usually invisible to readers by constructing grounded interpretations of the intended meanings of the various uses of context within as well as across studies. Our ethnographic perspective asked us to examine the text recursively to explore how the terms were used, by whom, for what purposes, under what conditions, in reference to what actions or practices, and with what outcomes (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1995; Spradley, 1980; Zaharlick e& Green, 1991). This lens provided both a conceptual and methodological tool to explore possible meanings and to make a case for a particular interpretation.

Our semantic ethnographic approach allowed us to hold constant our analytic method, while permitting variation in the conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches of the articles examined. After reading each article to observe mentions of the term and uses of a concept of context, we engaged in a three-step process: We identified the number of articles for each volume of
each journal, and the number of articles using context. We next examined each mention of context in each article and recorded the referents using the authors’ own words. For example, Pellegrini and Galda’s (1993) reexamination of symbolic play and literacy research included the following sentence in their article’s implications section:

What this means, in very abbreviated form, is that cognition in specific contexts is constructed as a result of interacting with different people in different roles; the more varied and stable the interactive contexts, the more diverse the cognitions. (p. 173)

We recorded the two referents (i.e., specific and interactive) for the two mentions of context as well as all other mentions in the article and followed this data gathering with semantic analyses of each mention in relation to all the referents to context within the article and to the findings of the whole article. This analysis of uses in all the articles led to the construction of clusters of uses representing four major analyses: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and thematic analysis (Spradley, 1980). We displayed the findings in taxonomies of clusters and their cover terms to represent the part-whole relationships among elements identified. Some of the findings of these semantic analyses, those referred to in this article, are represented in Figures 1 through 5. The figures, organized by journal, display each kind of mention of context (e.g., physical, classroom, school, world) clustered under a semantic cover term (e.g., place). For the RRQ analysis, with its larger set of mentions, we performed an analysis of the seven semantic cover terms we found (i.e., type, identity, place, community, activity, form, condition) into three domains of meaning. These three domains we classified according to their semantic commonalities as within-text contexts, surrounding-text contexts, and beyond-text contexts.

Within-text uses of context were characterized by concern with the features of the text being read by a reader or written by a writer during literacy events. For example, under the cover term place, 85 mentions used text as the referent; and, under the cover term form were included text features like pictures, information, and clues and cues. Those uses of context that clustered in the domain identified as surrounding-text context were concerned with the elements outside the actual text that directly influenced interaction with it. Under the cover term place were grouped classroom, everyday events, and learning center. Under form context was grouped discourse and social literacy. A new cover term category, community, appeared in the surrounding-text domain. Community was represented by the contexts of social relationships and peer culture as well as classroom social and people. The beyond-text category of context uses cohered around context as a kind of larger social, scholarly, environmental, historical, political, and educational influence that indirectly affects local literacy events. Place served as a cover term for preschool, research, school, and special education and regular classes. Form disappeared from the beyond-text category, signaling that context as a form was not used.
Figure 1. Taxonomy of Cover Terms Related to Context in RTE
A Summary of Findings: What Counts as Context?

Rather than replicate the detailed findings of the complete comparative study here, we present key portions of our findings to illustrate issues that serve the purpose of this article – to raise issues we think are of importance for further discussion among literacy researchers.

We identified 93 articles among those published in RTE and RRQ between 1989 and 1993 in which context was mentioned as a finding or as important to consider – 36 in RTE, and 57 in RRQ. In a more recent JLR issue (1996, Vol. 28, No. 3), context was directly mentioned throughout three of its four articles and implicated in all four. This set of findings confirmed for us the appropriateness of using this term as a way of tracing theory-method relationships.

Our analysis of all instances of the term context showed that in the majority of articles in both RRQ and RTE, the term context was often used with a modifier (e.g., classroom context, or context of the sentence). That is, some authors used the term in ways that showed they had a clear theoretical definition of the referenced context in mind, by providing a conceptual description of the term. However, other authors used the term without a modifier, suggesting that these authors assumed a common understanding of context with readers. In such instances, the referent was implicit and not immediately available in the researchers’ label, as well as placed in an article that lacked any specificity of definition or theoretical frame for context. Consequently, it was not possible to ascertain just what counted as context or whether two contexts were the same.

To see the importance of this term to authors, we began by identifying the frequency of occurrence (mention) – 60 in RTE, 442 in RRQ, and 19 in three of the four articles in the single issue of JLR. Analysis of the ways authors defined context showed that in these 96 articles, there were 224 different definitions or referents (e.g., school context, context of genre) – 35 in RTE, 172 in RRQ, and 17 in JLR. Further, we found that the term was often used multiple times in an article, either with the same definition or different definitions. For example, in the three JLR articles, the term occurred 19 times, with 17 different definitions or referents.

What these figures indicated was that within and across these journals, there was no established way of defining use of the term, thus making it important to consider what these studies reported in relationship to this term.

From this aspect of our comparative analyses, we concluded that even within an article, let alone within a subdisciplinary tradition, uses and meanings of terms, of which context is an example, are not constant. In addition, in the majority of these studies, although context counted as an important factor in the findings reported across perspectives and methods, we found few explicitly articulated or consistently defined definitions, posing problems for readers and for their theory development. As a result, there was no way of using our readings across the articles of the findings about context to illuminate our work, except to say that context, whatever that is, makes a difference.

The frequency of mention and lack of specific, conceptual definition of
Figure 2. Taxonomy of Cover Terms Related to Focus: Within-Text Context in RRQ
this term within as well as across articles, along with its multiplicity of uses, suggest an assumed “ordinariness” of use of the term that anthropologists call “folk status” (Spradley, 1980). That is, members of a particular discourse community, representing an intellectual ecology, may assume that they share common understanding of a term when, in fact, no common referent is held. Our analyses showed that this folk-status assumption is problematic in several ways. Not only are there multiple meanings for the same term, but there are often multiple terms for the same intended meaning. In addition, one term may be used to refer to dramatically different phenomena across studies. Further, the use of a “common” term may originate from differing theoretical conceptualizations of what counts as a definition of the term, making the possibility of determining what counts as the meaning of a term like context even more problematic.

Our analysis of the three journals made visible the complex and diverse nature of theory, frame, and perspective among researchers within the literacy field. Although this diversity is positive in that it provides a broad view of context, as we delineate more specifically in following sections, it can also be problematic. When authors or readers reduce terms to folk status, they artificially flatten this diversity, leaving unavailable to readers the theoretical roots of the informing language that could make cross-field discourse possible. When this occurs, members whose interests and related theory and methods assume different meanings for the term will not be able to access the particular meaning held by other members. Nor will outsiders to their intellectual community (e.g., policy and practice readers, readers from other traditions, potential new members) have the tools to access the ways the use of the terms may differ from those to which they are accustomed.

As readers, we found that articles providing a theoretical definition facilitated our understanding of the importance of findings and allowed us to assess the relative importance of a particular use of context as well as to move across studies more readily. When no definition was provided, our task as readers was complicated. In such instances, we had problems ascertaining what contributed to the differences we identified.

At this point, some of you might be wondering what all the fuss is about, over what you might consider to be a seemingly innocuous term like context. The invisibility and consequent seeming unimportance of the term is the very point we wish to make. Ninety-three articles across 5 years of two major journals referenced the term, and by their references reported that context made a difference in particular ways; in quite a few cases, context was central to both the focus and the findings. Even when authors did not identify context as a central area of study, their actions throughout their studies established its importance in three ways: (a) They selected it as an element to analyze, (b) they described it in terms of the bearing it had on the phenomena they were studying, and/or (c) they reported and discussed it as a finding. Thus, the researchers’ actions indicated that context was important theoretically, methodologically, and practically. However, given the lack of explicit definition in most articles, it was not possible to
FIGURE 3. Taxonomy of Cover Terms Related to Focus: Surrounding-Text Context in RRQ
derive from these studies what constituted context and how, in what ways, to whom, and to what extent it made a difference. Therefore, simply knowing that textual context influenced what occurred in the reading of a text or that a context beyond the written text was related to assessment measures or to what was identified provided little basis on which to build a theoretical understanding of the nature and contribution of context or to make recommendations for policy or practice.

The two following sections of this commentary lay out the analytical findings that underlie what we have represented as the problematic implications of this lack of theoretical specificity when using the term context. The findings are displayed in taxonomies which indicate the diversity of uses of context and which can be read to show patterns of difference in the uses of the term within and across the three journals we studied. In the next section, the findings from the RRQ and the RTE analyses are compared, followed by a section that compares JLR to the findings from the first two journals.

Examining the Problematic as Issues of Specificity and Complexity

The taxonomies from which the analyses in this section are made represent semantic analyses of each use of the term context in RRQ and RTE. These graphic representations made it possible to depict dimensions of semantic specificity, difference, and complexity. As previously mentioned, from our multistep analyses of the relationship between instances of mention and semantic meaning (Spradley, 1980), three domains – what we called within-text, surrounding-text, and beyond-text applications – emerged, which we have displayed for this commentary in five taxonomies (see Figures 1 through 5).

During the 5-years worth of RRQ articles we analyzed for their uses of context, the studies fell into three categories: those that focused on uses of contexts within texts, those that conceived of contexts as those conditions surrounding texts, and a remaining group of studies that was more concerned with macro contexts beyond the text or its immediate surrounding conditions. In studies that focus on uses of context within text (Figure 2), our analysis showed that, with few exceptions, the authors of these studies did not consider factors beyond or surrounding the text. That is, the authors’ actions and methodological approaches showed consideration of only print-related elements, suggesting a view of reading that involves “a reader” with “a text” without consideration of other influences. Even in instances where activities (contexts surrounding the text) were considered initially, their purpose was to focus the reader within the text. On the other hand, in studies focusing on each of the other domains – surrounding text and beyond text – the researchers were not concerned with textual features in exploring issues of literacy. This finding suggests that there is more
FIGURE 4. Taxonomy of Cover Terms Related to Focus: Beyond-Text Context in RRQ
than one conceptualization of literacy, and that two of the three that emerged in our study are not directly concerned with an individual reader and text.

Furthermore, although all three domains were found across articles in both RTE and RRQ, there was a pattern of difference in their distribution that suggests a difference in what counts as literacy among the research discourse communities for which these are research journals. The frequency and distribution of cover terms related to each of these foci is substantially different. In RTE (see Figure 1), five of the six domains for the term context referred to surrounding-text and beyond-text uses. Only one domain was associated with the text itself or with elements of text readers drew on in constructing an interpretation. In RRQ, the distribution of uses across these domains was much more diffuse, and they tended to cluster around each domain foci (see Figures 2–4). These differences suggest that in the RTE tradition these three domains of context are treated as one large, complex, interrelated foci, whereas in the tradition represented by RRQ, these three domains reflect three distinct perspectives and their related approaches to reading.

This analysis indicates that research reported in RRQ had a particular focus on dimensions and conceptualizations of literacy, a focus that differed from that found in RTE. Research reported in RTE (see Figure 1) generally focused on the context surrounding text (e.g., academic discussions, reader-response groups, physical arrangements, and space) and other circumstances of the literacy event, whereas research reported in RRQ focused on a wider range of factors influencing literacy or reading in and out of school settings.

The effect of these differences can be illustrated by examining one area common across the taxonomies of both journals and the intellectual ecologies they represent – what counted as form. As represented in these analyses of the use of the cover term form, in the period of 1989 to 1993, the reading field focused more on graphic, structural, and linguistic facets of context, whereas the English education field focused more on genre, narrative, and literary dimensions. This finding raised questions about what contributed to this difference. Was it simply because of the discipline, or were there other contributing factors? To address these questions, we examined who was studied in each of these articles to consider whether age or other population characteristics might account for these findings, in addition to authors’ and journal editors’ interests. Thus, we returned to the articles one more time to explore the populations studied in relationship to form. In RRQ, the populations for whom form was a context issue tended to be young children in kindergarten through third grade, whereas the genres, narrative thought, and literary studies of context tended to study students from middle grades through university (grade 3 to adults).

This difference was surprising to us and suggested that a dialogue across these fields might yield new directions for research in both. One way to understand these findings is that, although both focused on “reading,” what counted as reading or as a research interest in the study of reading differed. The difference
provides insights into why it has not been possible to use findings across these fields in a direct or summative manner. This analysis suggests that the juxtaposition of findings across these fields may be productive, in that differences identified can point to issues that may need to be considered to understand what readers need to know and do to meet their own goals as well as those of schooling and society.

Examples of questions for dialogue and study which could arise from juxtaposing cross-field findings regarding form and context might be: Can students of any age succeed in school literacy across levels of schooling without understanding genre, narrative thought, and literary dimensions of text along with the grammatical and other structural features of text? Do researchers of young children’s reading in school need to wait until children have mastered the structural before they explore what these same children know about genre, narrative, and other literary dimensions? What are the consequences for students when fields of research focus on only one of these dimensions of form?

Another issue arises when we take a closer look at each of the three domains within RRQ. Displaying the multiple meaningful layers of related cover and included terms can be a way of viewing levels of specificity and focus within studies and within articles written about them. For example, in the within-text focus (see Figure 2), many of the cover terms represented a group of elements that were themselves cover terms for other groups. Our analysis of the cover term form revealed this condition. Form served as a cover term for three more specific terms (text features, events in text, and linguistic), all of which served as

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**Figure 5. Taxonomy of Cover Terms Related to Context in JLR**
cover terms for more specific elements. Text features covered five elements (pictorial, information, clues and cues, print, and organizational). Each of these numerous embedded terms represented a part-whole meaningful relationship with the structure or form of the text in question in the study.

When we examined the multiple levels of specificity and their part-whole relationships across the categories of uses of context in RRQ, we learned there is greater specificity in part-whole elements in the within-text domain (see Figure 2), and comparatively less specificity in what constitutes a context surrounding text (see Figure 3). This analysis raised, once again, the problematic associated with use of the term context with limited theoretical definitions. For example, social (a surrounding-text cover term with 55 mentions in RRQ and 9 mentions in RTE) accounted for 34% of all uses of the term context in both RTE and RRQ. However, analysis of the surrounding-text taxonomy (see Figure 3) and the related text showed that what counts as social was not easily retrieved through specificity of reference across most articles using this term.

To examine this problem further and to explore what social meant in relation to context, we reentered the text of the articles to examine the level of specificity of definition for social context. This analysis showed differences in the ways authors referred to social context surrounding text. Some tended to speak in broader, nonspecific terms, making the identification of the elements constituting the social context more problematic. Additionally, some authors referred to the social context as a variable, others as a category, and still others as a process through which literacy was constituted.

These differences were associated with methodology, for to count something for a statistical analysis it must be seen to be a discrete category. The categorical point of view and approach differs from the point of view and approach of those who view literacy as socially constituted. Thus, the ways in which social context was defined were related to theoretical perspective as well as to methodology for collecting and analyzing data. These differences showed that within the surrounding-text focus, variations existed that need to be addressed, making it difficult to use findings from the different perspectives, even though each finds that social context makes a difference. In other words, it was difficult to understand what counts as context, when context counts, both literally and figuratively.

Finally, in the beyond-text domain of context use, the issue of specificity appeared to be even more problematic. In our domain analysis of levels of specificity of usage, the beyond-text category was much less specific than the other two, suggesting less emphasis in studies of this domain. Yet, analysis of the articles showed that this was not the case. In most articles focusing on context beyond text, the term used represented a key argument developed within the article. For example, the argument about authentic literacy context was a primary focus of one article in 1992.

Further differences across the three domains of RRQ were also telling. For purposes of brevity, we focus on only one more. Another analysis of the six cover
terms shared by each of the three domains (i.e., identity, place, community, activity, form, and condition) revealed that in the beyond-text category (see Figure 4), form was not used to refer to context, as it was in the surrounding-text and within-text categories. In this domain, there was also a marked increase in type and identity references. Additionally, the nature of the conditions identified also changed, and the broader influences beyond the text became relevant to the study of reading and literacy. Place became a field or setting within society.

These uses tend to frame the issue of literacy and reading, not as a text-based problematic or as an issue of conditions immediately or proximally surrounding the reading event, but as larger societal and institutional issues. These uses represent issues that researchers of beyond-text studies of literacy claim shape opportunities for learning literacy that individuals and groups of students have within schools, programs, and activities. These articles, therefore, tend to focus on identifying issues related to gaining access to literacy learning (e.g., authentic, contextualized or situated, contextualized print versus noncontextualized print, historical context, political context, developmental context).

The uses of context, then, when examined in part-whole relationships that cluster into three distinctive domains, suggest that the intellectual ecology of literacy journal contributors and readers might be said to represent three intellectual perspectives: those interested in literacy issues within text, those who focus on issues emerging from conditions surrounding text, and those whose view extends to larger scale issues beyond text. Although greater specificity in the uses of the term context occurs within the within-text domain, suggesting more explicit opportunities for common understandings of its uses, fewer uses occur in surrounding-text uses, and fewer still in beyond-text uses. Because each of these three foci implicates its own related conceptual frameworks, methods of data gathering, methodologies for analysis and their resultant findings, ample opportunity exists for breakdowns in communication across domains of interest. Although journal contributors and readers are a community of readers, they may be a community joined by a common frustration in how to make the most of their tradition’s dialogue.

Adding JLR to the Discussion

We undertook an analysis of a recent issue of JLR as a form of triangulation (Denzin, 1989; Zaharlick & Green, 1991). As indicated previously, there had been a 3-year delay in conducting our comparative study and in writing this Critical Issues commentary. Therefore, to ascertain whether the original findings were still applicable or whether they were time bound, we elected to examine what was at the time the most recent issue of JLR (1996, Vol. 28, No. 3). The selection of
**JLR** was purposeful in two ways. First, it provided a further means of determining whether the patterns identified in one key research journal in the field of reading were similar to or different from another key research journal. Second, it permitted us to explore whether the issues raised in the comparison of **RTE** and **RRQ** were also critical issues for readers of **JLR**.

Following the same multistep process methodology we had used with **RTE** and **RRQ**, we analyzed the appearances of *context* in the **JLR** issue’s four articles. A summary of findings of this analysis is presented in Figure 5. As indicated in this figure, analysis of the frequency of uses showed that there were 19 occurrences and 17 uses in the three articles, all with modifiers. Of these 17 uses, 15 (88%) were unique uses occurring only once. Only two uses were mentioned more than once – field-based teaching (2) and real world (2). This pattern is similar to the one identified in **RTE** (62%), but not in **RRQ** (25%). Although, the sample size is too small to know whether this pattern would hold across a 5-year sample such as the one used in the previous analyses, it does provide a baseline for further analysis.

When we compared cover terms appearing in the taxonomies across journals, only four overlapping terms were found between **JLR** and **RRQ** – instruction, classroom, meaningful, and story; and only two for **RTE** (instruction and classroom). The lack of congruity between terms in **JLR** and in **RRQ** is intriguing, given the fact that both are research journals in the field of reading. In the **RRQ** analysis, *text* was used 85 times, *grammatical sentence* 31 times, and *social* 55 times, accounting for 41% of all occurrences. The total lack of occurrence of these terms within the four **JLR** articles suggests a possible shift in language between 1993 and 1996, which in turn, may reflect a shift in theoretical orientation or perspective.

This finding was unexpected, given the density of occurrence of these three uses of context in **RRQ**. To explore this further, we returned to the text of the articles to examine whether the authors’ descriptions and arguments might provide a basis for identifying similarities that the lack of overlap in terminology masked. Analysis of how context was described in the texts showed that the theoretical orientation described in articles 3 and 4 of **JLR** (activity theory, situated cognition, sociopsychological) were consonant with earlier perspectives in **RRQ** that were grouped under the concept of social context.

Thus, a dependence on any single term or key word for a search of the literature may mask commonality in perspective. To test this hypothesis, we examined the first article in **JLR** and compared it with articles that assessed issues of form in **RRQ**. This analysis showed a consonance with studies that focused on form within the text. The article reported the findings of a comparison of reading achievement across sites of one reading program. The authors selected test instruments that assessed reading performance similar to those studied in **RRQ** articles (letter identification, sounds, phonetic synthesis skills, sentences). This analysis showed, once again, that although particular aspects of content were similar, the key terms (e.g., referents to within-text context) differed.
These comparative analyses in which the content of the article, not the common use of terms, provided the basis for identifying commonality across time and journals showed the problem encountered by researchers, policymakers, or school-based educators who depend on key terms for searching the literature. Although this lack of overlap can be viewed as showing a difference in focus, the lack of overlap also poses a problem for those seeking to identify similarities across studies. A key-word search would not produce articles that might have similarity in content but vary in terminology; rather, it might lead to a false conclusion that there is little agreement or no research in a particular area. This is especially problematic in an age of key-word, mechanized searches. (See Green, 1983, for a similar discussion of 10 studies, all of which purport to study teaching and learning as linguistic processes.)

To examine whether the cover terms identified in the previous analyses applied to the articles in JLR, we explored the range of uses by cover term across the three articles. This analysis showed that six of the seven cover terms identified in the previous analyses (type, form, condition, activity, place, community) were applicable. One term, identity, did not appear. The lack of use of identity may have resulted from the limited sample size and not from a conceptual difference or shift across journals and JLR.

To inquire further into the similarities and differences between this journal and the other two, we constructed a table that showed the distribution of cover terms and uses by focus – within-text, surrounding-text and beyond-text contexts. As indicated in Table 1, cover terms across articles showed a pattern of variation in focus similar to the ones identified in the larger analysis of RTE and RRQ. This analysis showed that the three foci identified in the RTE analysis and expanded for the RRQ analysis could be used to distinguish between articles within JLR. Article 1 referred to within-text and surrounding-text contexts. Articles 3 and 4 referred to beyond-text and surrounding-text contexts. In article 3, there also appeared to be a within-text referent. However, analysis of the text of the article showed that this reference was part of a student’s journal entry used as evidence for a point being made by the author and not part of the author’s argument. Therefore, this reference was not counted in our examination of foci.

By examining this use of context foci within and across the articles, we identified a pattern that contrasted with the one identified in RRQ. Rather than having a primary focus, each article in this issue used context to refer to two of the three foci – within text, surrounding text, and beyond text. Analysis of these pairs of reference showed a logical link between the different foci. For example, the authors of the first article referred to within-text and surrounding-text contexts. The cover terms showed that conceptual condition and activity (context of instruction, cooperative learning) were used to frame what was meant by the context of the within-text context.

In the two articles that referred to beyond-text and surrounding-text contexts, the links were also logical. In article 3, the beyond-text cover terms served to frame an institutional point of view – a real-world context (being in the
schools to do teacher education) and teacher-education context (a program within which one learns to be a teacher). The more local surrounding-text context in this study focused on the actions within a single classroom that were part of a field-based teacher education program. This reference to context served to set conditions and place for having students examine ways of engaging with and producing text.

Analysis of article 3 also showed a similar pattern in which one use of context served as a statement of condition for another type of context. For example, the study reported in the JLR article was part of a larger study (a beyond-text context). In this instance, this reference and relationship showed that context was used to frame the research reported as well as to discuss factors that influenced what participants did with text. In this way, the concept of context and reference to context was used to highlight method as well as to relate theory-method issues.

These findings in our analysis of the JLR issue confirm and build on our earlier analyses of RTE and RRQ. Our findings from this three-journal study show that even when context is explicitly defined for one application, and reused with this explicit meaning, it is frequently used differently in the same article. In other words, uses remain inconsistent across areas of study, within disciplines, within studies, and even within subsections of studies.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Place Form (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Beyond text</td>
<td>Community (2) Place Type</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beyond text</td>
<td>Condition Type Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Form (not the author's)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Analysis across foci and cover terms showed that the articles in JLR had overlapping foci with those in RRQ, and little overlap with those in RTE. This finding confirms the differences across fields identified in our previous comparative analysis. Analysis of the populations studied showed a difference within and across fields. The JLR articles showed a broad range of ages studied from kindergarten through adult. This range was not found in articles in RRQ from 1989 to 1993. However, a subsequent analysis of volumes in RRQ from 1993 on showed a similar pattern. That is, in volumes in the last 4 years, articles covered a broader range of ages of readers than in the previous 5 years. This shift is significant in that it brings with it a different range of topics and issues of concern. However, when this range is compared with the one found in RTE from 1989 to 1993, the variation in focus and cover terms still holds. Even when age or schooling level is constant across these journals, the focus and areas of interest reflected in the cover terms differs.

Conclusion

One reader of our report on the initial study asked why readers should be concerned with a definition or theoretical discussion of context, if context was not the focus of the study? This question surprised us given the claims by multiple researchers, across studies, that context made a difference. It is not our claim that context makes a difference, although our theoretical perspective would agree with this. Rather, it was the claim across authors in the articles examined that made it an important aspect to consider. Given the frequency of use of the term context across articles and years and, thus, the implied importance of it to the reported findings, we found the lack of visibility of theoretical definition problematic.

This lack of explicit and theoretical definition poses particular problems for the field of literacy research. However, we have presented the description of our study of the definitions (or lack thereof) provided for context in order to illustrate in concrete terms the larger issue. As Birdwhistell (1977), Strike (1974), and Cushman (1991) pointed out, choices as to what and how to study are shaped by what is identified as important in the language of the field. If context, for example, is repeatedly only indirectly referred to or used as a folk term with indeterminate meaning, researchers’ plans to build on the design or findings for their own studies are compromised, and as a field we are unknowingly self-determining the replication of possibly problematic findings. Such findings also pose problems for school-based readers and policy analysts seeking to relate the findings to their local situations.

In failing to provide the conceptual discussion or theoretical description constituting the term’s use within their studies, the authors have unknowingly placed the full, unabsolvable responsibility of interpreting the meaning of the
construct and its importance on readers, who read as though they shared their perspective, but may in fact have another. The sociocultural theory that guides our work (Dixon & Green, 1993; Green et al., 1996; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992) argues that, although it is not possible to insure a particular reading, informed readings within a range of understanding obtainable within a particular perspective are possible. The failure to provide a theoretical discussion of key constructs, whether identified on an a priori or on a grounded (a data-driven) basis, makes even such a proscribed range of readings unattainable. For example, without a systematic description or a theoretical definition of context or the type of context discussed within and across articles, readers—whether researchers, educators, or policymakers—cannot ascertain whether their local situation is the same as those referred to by the labeling modifier, for example, the context of the world, of the community of readers, of the genre, of the organization, and of response.

By not theoretically defining these terms, the authors also pose problems for readers concerned about generalizability or transferability, issues of concern across paradigms. The meta-analysis work of Guzzetti, Snyder, Glass, and Gamas (1993) examined the research on reading in science across the disciplines of reading education and science education. Their analysis showed that there was little commonality in literature, purpose, or approaches to reading instruction across disciplines. This meta-analysis adds support to the rationale for our comparative study—the unrequited need to read across disciplines to understand how disciplinary interests and foci shape what can be known. It also suggests that the pattern of findings in our analysis of context were not idiosyncratic to the term context, but are representative of a larger problem—differences in conceptualization and in lack of conceptual analysis across fields.

The multistep, ethnographic semantic analysis we needed to identify the use and definition (possible or stated) of the term context across articles raised an additional concern—how does the practice of indexing using a key term approach, shape, and limit what can be known. Two issues related to this practice were identified. First, it raised questions about who selects the terms, how, and for what purpose? In the past, authors have been asked by editors and publishers to select terms for an index or key terms for a catalog. Recently, however, surrogates have been used. In some instances, an editor hires someone to construct an index or use a computerized indexing program. In either case, the quality of the index depends on the knowledge that the indexer holds of the field, not merely on a personal logic.

Second, given the invisibility of the definition, yet importance of the term context in many studies, many of the articles we identified as important to the study would not appear. If these articles would not be found through a key-word search, the sample identified would have been a more limited and thus a biased sample. By depending solely on author- or indexer-identified key terms, usually limited to three per article, related and important discussions would be missed.

Had we not systematically reviewed 5 years of articles across journals, the
importance of this term across methods and theoretical positions would not have been identified. Additionally, we would not have identified what appears to be a set of paradoxes – if context makes a difference, why was it not considered a key construct by researchers as indicated in their choice of key terms for indexing, and why was it not defined more explicitly? How can a finding be important, yet the construct (or variable) used to identify it be vague or undefined?

Our analysis of cover terms and their included elements shows variation both within and across fields as represented by the articles in JLR, RTE, and RRQ, making visible factors contributing to the problems faced by those within and outside our literacy research field seeking to “read” across discourse communities. The discussion of the findings suggests that although the research ecologies of English education and reading each purport to study a common phenomena – literacy processes and practices – what each studies differs and how they conceptualize commonly referenced phenomena varies. Our analysis also shows that these differences are not merely ones of theory and methodology. Analysis of the populations studied and foci or purposes of the research shows differences across fields. These differences, therefore, lead us to two final points, one about the issue of context, and the other about the field of literacy research.

One way to see a positive effect of the difference is to regard it as pointing to the need in the design of future educational research to include theoretically defined “contextual” factors and features. Mishler’s question in his 1979 benchmark article about context “Meaning in Context, Is There Any Other Kind?” argued for the need to consider the concept of context – how it means and what we mean by it – in the educational research that is done. However, as Duranti and Goodwin in Rethinking Context (1992) convincingly argued:

At the moment the term means quite different things within alternative research paradigms, and indeed even within particular traditions seems to be defined more by situated practice, use of the concept to work with particular analytical problems, than by formal definition. From our perspective, lack of a single formal definition, or even general agreement about what is meant by context, is not a situation that necessarily requires a remedy. Instead, the fact that so many investigators recognize the importance of context and are actively involved in trying to unravel how it works is precisely why this concept provides such a productive focus for study at the present time. (p. 2)

Conceptually, context exists as a relationship between a focal event and the field of action within which that event is embedded (Duranti  & Goodwin, 1992). As Duranti and Goodwin have argued and our study confirmed, the multiplicity of relationships between focal events and their fields as represented in the literacy studies in our research community can serve as a productive force. By attending to how we define context in each instance, we make possible dialogues about how contexts are a part of our findings. These dialogues, based on reflexivity of and through our own language, will help us build the discourse resources necessary to read and understand our own field.
Author Note

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