At a time when literacy is more important than ever to citizenship, professional employment, and future life pathways, we see persistent gaps in literacy achievement between various cultural groups in the United States. Throughout the years literacy research has progressed from deficit explanations of the “literacy” crisis to more culturally and socially oriented research that revealed disconnects between home and school literacy practices. Linguists and literacy theorists have helped us to reconsider literacy as “literacies” that are multiple, socially situated cultural practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hymes, 1974; New London Group, 1996; Street 1984). Through ethnographic case studies informed by the cross cultural and sociocultural traditions, we learned that valuable language and literacy practices in homes and communities have been largely unnoticed, ignored, or misunderstood by schools and formal institutions (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1997; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Mahiri, 1998).

While we have been able to theorize literacy as a cultural practice (instead of an autonomous one) and we have been able to document the existence of non-school literacies, what we need now is to establish a research-base that demonstrates how culturally accommodating literacy practices are improving literacy learning and literacy achievement for historically underserved groups. Toward this end, this chapter explores how educators have effectively accommodated to demographic influences in their literacy instruction. From my own research and from examining existing literature I will share powerful examples of how educators have been able to achieve remarkable results by accounting for demographic influences in their literacy instruction. From my own research and from examining existing literature I will share powerful examples of how educators have been able to achieve remarkable results by accounting for demographic influences in their literacy instruction.

I begin with the assumption that all successful learning is the result of meaningful connection and therefore all successful literacy teaching will draw connections between the worlds of students and the world of academic literacy. Therefore I include work from ethnographies of literacy where scholars have documented powerful literacy practices in out of school settings from groups that have traditionally been labeled as non-literate in school settings. I then show how researchers have built upon this work to establish practices in school that draw upon these out of school language and literacy practices. I conclude with a call to educators to become social theorists and social scientists that continually explore the lives of their students in search of making positive and powerful connections to literacy pedagogy.

New Literacy Studies: The Importance of Context to Literacy Learning

Shirley Brice Heath, in Ways With Words (1983), reports the findings of her longitudinal study of the language and literacy practices of families in the Piedmont Carolinas. The study showed that students often fail in school literacy even though they engage in legitimate literacy practices in the home. The study revealed the power of ethnography as an additive tool when studying communities that have been historically underserved by schools. I say additive because through ethnography we are able to unpack the logic of cultural practice. Rather than looking for deficits in students, families, and communities, ethnography allows us to understand how communities make sense of the world on their own terms. The assumption in ethnography is that cultures have a logic and intelligence all of their own and they exist on a relative equal footing of legitimacy and sophistication when viewed through a relatively objective lens (Geertz, 2000). Heath’s study and other ethnographers from the New Literacy Studies (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984; Purcell-Gates, 1997) have had tremendous substantive and methodological impact on the field of literacy studies. These studies have shown us that literacies are multiple, they have taken us into the literate lives of people who have struggled in school, and they have shown us the power of cultural study to inform educational practice.

The question for this chapter is how have teachers
learned about their local contexts in ways that allowed them to develop powerful and relevant literacy pedagogies? The best way to understand this question is to study what successful language arts teachers have done across contexts. Toward this end I have identified studies that show how teachers adapted to the specific needs and concerns of the students to create rigorous and relevant English Language Arts instruction. I focus on three primary areas of scholarship: popular culture, sociocultural language pedagogies, and youth participatory action research. From a meta-analysis of these studies my goal is to offer both a general theory of English Language Arts Teaching in context and an approach to learning about students and incorporating student’s lives into literacy teaching.

**Youth Popular Culture**

Over the past decade a host of scholars have examined the use of popular culture to make connections with students who have struggled in English. Through critical ethnographies and action research projects conducted in classrooms these scholars have shown the positive outcomes associated with literacy practices that adapt to local contexts. One of the pioneers in this work is Donna Alvermann (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999) whose work in the late 1990s is really the first to connect the worlds of popular culture and English teaching. Like many of us would later come to do, Alvermann and her colleagues recognized in students’ budding interest in media technologies a possible entry point into academic work. Alvermann’s work has explored the myriad ways that children and adolescents make meaning of the world through their explorations of popular culture. Alvermann shows students generating excitement and participating in traditional academic activities of reading and writing as a result of their interest in video games and hip-hop music. Her scholarship provides many examples of ways that classroom teachers draw upon students’ interest in popular culture to learn academic content. In one example a teacher collaboratively developed a unit on Pokemon with her sixth graders (Alvermann & Xu, 2003). Together they created a unit that met standards for science, math, and reading language arts. In the reading/language arts portion of the unit, the students brought Gameboys to class and wrote how-to essays that would explain to strangers how to play the Pokemon game. The students were enthusiastic and the teacher ended up playing a game by reading instructions written by a student who, until that time, had written very little in her class. In distinguishing between more effective and less effective approaches to she advocates for:

Developing students’ ability to be self-reflexive in their uses of popular culture. Teachers working from this perspective provide opportunities for students to explore issues such as “how media and the mass-produced icons of popular culture situate us into relations of power by shaping our emotional, political, social, and material lives.” (Alvermann & Xu, 2003, p. 149)

Fisher (2007) conducted an ethnographic investigation of the Power Writers, an after school writing program for students of color in the Bronx, New York. Through writing poems that spoke to their everyday experiences growing up in the city, these young people also developed a passion for writing that translated to conversations about academic language and literacy. Similarly Jocson (2008) examined the literacy learning of urban high school youth in June Jordan’s Poetry for the People program. Jocson’s study included seven students who, over a multi-year period, developed empowering literacies as they read, wrote, published, and performed poetry in and outside of school. Using a sociocultural and critical framework on literacy and pedagogy, her study focused on the experiences of urban youth to understand the changes in their identity and literacies associated with becoming critical poets.

For years Elizabeth Moje has studied the out of school literacy experiences of youth of color in attempts to inform content area literacy instruction. Her early work in Utah explored the literacy practices of gangs (Moje & Thompson, 1996), and her recent work has examined the outside of school popular reading practices of Latino youth in Southwestern Detroit in attempts to make connections to their literacy development in social studies and science classrooms. In 2000 Moje authored *All the Stories We Have* in which she demonstrates ways that adolescents’ lived experiences can serve as the focal point of secondary curricula. Moje argues that, in order to maximize literacy learning, educators need strategies to facilitate their own learning about students both in and out of the classroom. To emphasize this point, and to offer explicit strategies, Moje draws from adolescents’ stories to highlight what students need from teachers. Moje’s work combines sociocultural learning theory, youth popular culture, and adolescent literacy to advocate for interdisciplinary, project-based pedagogies that build outward from youth’s lived experience to content area pedagogies.

Employing a New Literacy Studies framework that draws methodologically from the work of Heath, Street, Moll, and others, I have conducted a series of ethnographic studies exploring the possible connections between pedagogies of popular culture and the development of academic and critical literacies. For example, I have conducted studies that investigate the potential of drawing upon youth engagement with hip-hop culture to teach critical reading, literary analysis, and the production of expository and creative writing (Morrell, 2004). Along with a colleague (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), I developed a curriculum that explored the role of poets in history and in the present day. As a class we read classic poets such as Shakespeare and the Romantic poets, but we also read hip-hop texts and discussed the role that hip-hop artists play as the spokespersons for urban youth. At the culmination of the unit we had the students compare and contrast hip-hop songs with canonical poems. Students were able to draw upon their knowledge of hip-hop culture to develop sophisticated analyses of both the hip-hop texts and canonical poems. From interviews we
also learned that the students had an increased motivation to study the hip-hop texts and they gained an appreciation for canonical poetry. In the analysis of the discourse and the written artifacts, we had ample evidence that students were also developing the academic literacy skills of argument and textual analysis.

In more recent work I have investigated the potential of critical media pedagogies with urban youth, assessing the way that a critical media education can make youth better consumers and producers of media (Morrell, 2008). For example I have documented the ways that young people can be taught to decipher negative and stereotypical images in popular media and I have also documented the process involved in young people becoming producers of short documentary films covering issues of inequality in their schools and communities (Morrell, 2008). This work has shown that youth are capable of producing high-level digital films and this process of becoming digital filmmakers involves multiple traditional and new media literacies.

Other notable scholars in popular culture have looked at the intersection of hip-hop and academic literacy. Some of these scholars include Jamal Cooks, David Kirkland, and Marc Lamont Hill. Hill (2009), for example, conducted an ethnography of a hip-hop centered English class at a Philadelphia High School. Hill’s goal was to use hip-hop as a strategy for helping students to gain textual analysis skills, but also to challenge students to explore the relationships between mainstream popular culture and their own identity development. Hill’s in-depth study of classroom life shows that the use of a critical hip-hop lens enabled students to open up to one another and develop a powerful community where they were able to share their stories while also learning valuable literacy and analytic skills. He also reported increased engagement and attendance from students as a result of the Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE).

Sociocultural Language Pedagogies

Drawing on the cultural historical psychology of Vygotsky (1978), Luis Moll (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and his colleagues at the University of Arizona began conducting research on the funds of knowledge possessed in Spanish-speaking communities where students were underperforming on traditional literacy measures. His research team found considerable funds of knowledge that could be drawn upon by educators to make links between these local language and literacy practices and the worlds of the classroom. They also began to work with local teachers both helping them understand how to engage in community ethnography and how to transform their classroom practice to make it more relevant, more connected, and more affirming of their literate lives outside of the classroom.

Near this same time in Southside Chicago, Carol Lee (1993, 1995) was drawing many of the same conclusions as Moll and his research team, except her population consisted primarily of African-American students and the discipline was English. Lee, also drawing from Vygotsky, found that

the language practice of signifyin’ contained many of the sophisticated cognitive skills that could be applied to the interpretation of literary texts. According to Lee:

Signifying, a form of discourse in the African American community, is full of irony, double entendre, satire, and metaphorical language. Participation in this form of discourse is highly prized in many circles within the Black community. (1995, p. 612)

Lee’s study involved a culturally based cognitive apprenticeship where students first became aware of their unconscious use of signifying in social discourse and then learned to use these cultural skills to analyze canonical literature. In several units, Lee was able to draw upon her students’ implicit knowledge of signifying to improve students’ reading comprehension.

For 15 years Kris Gutierrez has served as the principal investigator of an after school computer learning club for low-income elementary students in Southern California. This project (Las Redes) has produced path-breaking scholarship on the application of sociocultural theory to the literacy development of English Language Learners. Through countless studies Gutierrez and her colleagues (i.e., Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999) have been able to document how a culturally appropriate computer video game can engage and motivate students to develop academic language and literacy. The video game taps into students growing connection to popular culture and technology as well as their desire to learn through play. The central character El Maga an androgynous cyber entity that asks the students to write to him/her about their experiences at the learning center and specifically, their challenges playing the computer games. Gutiérrez and her colleagues state that:

The children and El Maga continuously engage in problemsolving exchanges in which they pose questions to one another hoping to achieve their own individual and shared goals. For example, El Maga often asks questions to help the children elaborate on statements made in previous e-mail texts. It is important to note that the children do not always answer Maga’s questions. While this is one goal of the activity, the larger learning goal is to promote ongoing communication and collaboration between the children and El Maga en route to literacy development. The larger database illustrates how this evolving relationship becomes the stimulus for elaborated writing and problem solving. (1999, p. 88)

Gutiérrez has shown that the hybrid literacy practices promote a culture of collaboration, joint participation, and literacy learning as the students work together and individually through the game. Gutiérrez has drawn on this sociocultural research to fundamentally challenge contemporary approaches to literacy teaching that are developed out of marketplace priorities rather than a true understanding of how students learn. She argues for more culturally relevant pedagogies that honor the students’
sociohistorical literacies, that allow for hybrid literacies to exist alongside dominant literacy practices, and the creation of a Third Space where work and play and sanctioned and non-sanctioned discourses can co-exist in vibrant and authentic learning environments.

**Youth Participatory Action Research**

A third area of literacy teaching that pays attention to contest is an approach to instruction that actually engages youth as researchers of their own environment. Several scholars, myself included, have contended that working with youth as researchers of their own environments allows the youth to tap into expertise in a way that also encourages them to act in powerful ways as civic agents.

In their 2006 *Harvard Educational Review* article, Veronica Garcia and a team of high school researchers (Garcia, Agbemakplido, Abdella, Lopez, & Registe) describe the experiences of Boston-area high school students involved in a student leadership and social justice class. The course, which focused on student research and social justice aimed to get students more involved in exploring social issues while also developing academic skills. This particular article explores the student group that investigated high school students’ perspectives on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act’s definition of a highly qualified teacher. Garcia, who was also an instructor in the course, worked with the students to develop action research projects where they examined their high school experiences with teachers. Students’ research suggested that highly qualified teachers should cultivate safe, respectful, culturally sensitive, and responsive learning communities, establish relationships with students’ families and communities, express their high expectations for their students through instructional planning and implementation, and know how students learn. This article speaks to the need to reconsider our policies and practices around teacher development, but it also speaks to the power of working with youth as researchers of their experiences. The youth, through sharing their personal stories and conducting research, were able to speak back to a policy that they felt had a negative impact on their educational experiences. They were also able to use this experience to develop academic research and presentation skills that are useful for academic advancement as well as professional membership and civil life. Finally, the youth became co-authors publishing an article in one of the most respected journals for educational research.

In a similar effort Michelle Fine and a team of high school co-researchers published an article in *Teachers College Record* in 2005 (Fine et al., 2005) outlining their impressive multi-method participatory research project. Written as a letter to Zora Neale Hurston, author, anthropologist, and part of the Harlem Renaissance, the students use research to describe the victories and challenges they have faced in the 50 years following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While there have been some gains, the students’ research points out the impact of negative policies that help to maintain a persistent opportunity gap that affects countless youth in U.S. schools. Fine’s work with youth in New York City is yet another example of the power of participatory action research to engage students critically and academically. Her 2008 co-edited a book with Julio Cammarota entitled *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* chronicles successful YPAR projects across the county.

In *Becoming Critical Researchers* (Morrell, 2004), I explored a community of practice where high school students learned to research their educational conditions as part of a process to learn how to more effectively navigate a school where they had traditionally not done well. The school population was fairly evenly split along racial and class lines and the program with which I worked focused primarily on students who were lower income and African American and Latino. While the affluent students performed well academically and attended prestigious public and private universities, the African American and Latino students’ performance more resembled that of the urban high schools in the area with below average test scores, low grade point averages, and low completion rates. The district superintendent, the principal at the time, and several other stakeholders wanted to understand how two different schools could exist on the same campus. They also wanted to know what to do about it so, in 1997, the Pacific Beach project was created to explore these issues through following a randomly selected cohort of ninth graders, members of that “second school” by virtue of their race, their family income, and their performance in grades K–8. My role in the project as a graduate student at a nearby university became to work with the lead teacher at Pacific Beach High (also a graduate student) and to create a summer program at the university where students would learn more about the process of becoming critical researchers. My focus then, was on creating a powerful learning community, one that would develop a critical consciousness of the inequitable schooling conditions they were experiencing, but also one that would develop a motivation to develop college-ready academic skills. At the time we were framing our work around a triangular approach that included Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 1970), John Dewey’s education for civic engagement, and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (1991) learning through joint participation in changing communities of practice. What all of these works had in common was a focus on the learning context and a keen interest in building learning from the immediate social contexts of the students. Our response was to center the curriculum around the life of young people attending poor and failing schools.

For obvious reasons the students were motivated to participate in the research. They were greatly affected by the schooling conditions they were studying and they recognized that they could collect, analyze, and share information that would bring attention to these problems in ways that might generate conversations and actions leading to change. My findings showed that the process of becoming
a participant in this research community had lasting effects on students’ identities as scholars and their development of academic and critical literacies.

**Teachers as Social Scientists and Social Theorists of Language and Literacy**

At the conclusion of this chapter I would advocate that, rather than thinking about a particular type of instruction, we need to focus more on how teachers learn effectively about students’ lives in ways that allow them to incorporate this powerfully into their standards-based curricula. How can teachers facilitate academic development without sacrificing cultural sensitivity? How can teachers facilitate the development of traditional literacies while also imparting important 21st-century literacy skills? These are the questions of our time.

One of the biggest decisions we can make as educators is to work more closely with the families and neighborhoods where we teach, but one of the first challenges we face is attempting to learn more about students, their families, the neighborhoods, and the cities in which we teach. I know as a student I learned a great deal about ancient civilizations, I even learned a great deal about the United States government and American history, but I learned very little in my formal schooling about the local cultures in my neighborhood or even about the cities where I grew up. For teachers to learn about local cultural practices and the history of the neighborhoods and communities where they teach, they must become, in a sense, cultural anthropologists.

Generally, anthropologists use participant observation a methodology where they record field notes, conduct interviews, and collect every day artifacts that reveal something about the practices in a particular culture; they do this for an extended amount of time to learn something about how that particular group makes sense of the world on their own terms (Geertz, 2000) and, from this information, they create ethnographies or extended narratives that describe life as it typically happens inside of a particular cultural community at a particular moment in time. Granted, teachers have busy full lives just trying to plan and stay on top of life inside of their classrooms and they cannot spend all of their days involved in ethnographic observation, but I will try to show some ways that teachers can develop their ethnographic and sociological sensibilities that may enhance what they do inside of classrooms.

Studying culture means studying everyday ways of life for historically marginalized populations within and against the institutions that constrain them. The study of culture requires a combination of anthropology, sociology, and social theory in order to understand the whole picture. I will say more about this in a moment, for now, back to the simple definition of the term. Culture is a frequently used, but seldom-defined term in the educational landscape. Sometimes culture can be used to refer to a national way of life (i.e., American culture). Sometimes culture is used as a politically correct euphemism to replace the problematic and more volatile and sensitive term of race; sometimes it is used to mean ethnicity. Multiculturalism, for example, is usually a term used in reference to honoring diverse ethnic cultures. These grand narratives of culture are generally the domain of sociology, or philosophy, or ethnic studies and are valuable but generally not the way that we primarily envision culture in schools and classrooms. Of course, students come as members of nations and races and religions; however, educators are also interested in cultural practices inside of homes and communities. This idea of culture as a local practice comes to us from anthropology, a discipline of the social sciences that is interested in the study of human beings and their beliefs, values, and activities in their local contexts. The primary method of anthropology is participant observation or ethnography, where the researcher spends long amounts of time with members of a particular group and writes detailed field notes of what he or she sees in addition to collecting photographs and other cultural artifacts. Some of the more famous anthropologists of the early 20th century (i.e., Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Margaret Mead) studied “exotic” cultures in far away places (from Europe and the U.S.) like Samoa and the Trobriand Islands. Of course, this is tied to the evolution of anthropology as a largely Western discipline developed at a time (the early 20th century) when the United States and Europe held imperialist relationships with other regions of the globe. India was still a colony of Britain, most African nations were then colonies of European nations, and Islands such as Samoa and the Philippines were commonwealths under the watchful eye of the United States or some other global power. This colonial-colonized underpinning of anthropological research has drawn its necessary criticism and, while there is still some of the exotic tied to anthropological research, we now have many more examples in education of anthropological work being used to help us understand how people in local neighborhoods make meaning of the world on their own terms so that we can better make connections between their worlds and the world of education. In its most positive and pure sense, cultural anthropology is an additive form of research that is respectful and honoring of the sophisticated logic that is at the heart of everyday life and membership in communities (Moll, 2000).

Not everyone who studies culture, however, comes from the anthropological tradition. Others, for example, come from sociology and look at the relationship between local cultures and the larger society. From the sociological perspective, culture is understood as a relationship between local practices and the global institutions. Studying what it means to be African American inside of a nation with a history of racism and inequity may require a different set of tools than what an anthropologist would use during an extended stay within an African American community in the Mississippi Delta. In addition to fieldwork or interviews, sociologists would also look at demographic data on educational attainment, employment, residential segregation, incarceration rates, life expectancy, and political participation, to name a few. They might also look at these
data over extended periods of time to gain a more historical understanding of life within a particular cultural community. An anthropologist might miss the global or historical context for specific local practices. However, the tradeoff is that anthropologists usually have more thick description (Geertz, 2000) of a few local events about which they are able to say a great deal. Sociologists will have more broad data, but it may not have the specific details of day to day life for a particular group.

People in the field of cultural studies would take an even different tack and explore the practices of everyday subcultures like skaters, or MySpace users and understand the consumption and production associated with these practices. Those in cultural studies are more interested in culture as popular culture than culture as ethnic affiliation per se. Each of these perspectives is unique and important and they will all inform how we think about cultures, communities, and practices in language and literacy.

There are many ways to build upon the work of social theorists and social scientists to develop our capacities to learn meaningful information about life in communities that we can then incorporate into our classroom instruction and just the general life of the schools. There are many spaces inside of schools that are not only class-based that can also show ties to the communities that surround them. I can think of several schools where I have worked that have murals and other artwork that reflects the history of the surrounding communities; parents and other residents have come into schools to plant gardens; schools have held weekend events where local citizens share food and arts and crafts with students, teachers, and staff. Even less formally, schools can invite local community members to visit and share a little about what they do. I was recently at a school assembly where a local author and bookstore owner addressed the entire ninth-grade class. He talked about his past, life in the neighborhood, read passages from his book, and invited the entire ninth-grade class. He talked about his past, life in the neighborhood, read passages from his book, and invited the students to visit him at his bookstore.

All of these activities are worthwhile and go a long way in establishing good will between a school and its surrounding community. I still contend that the most important outcomes, though, will be on a more local and immediate scale; and that will be the comfort and affirmation that students will feel seeing and hearing themselves in the everyday activities that happen in the classrooms of individual teachers.

**Conclusion: Powerful Teaching is Powerful Teaching**

This chapter taps into research and scholarship that reveal the important knowledge base that teachers have developed in order to ensure success across contexts. It helps to have knowledge of sociocultural theory, especially as it relates to learning and to multiple literacies. It also helps to have an anthropological and sociological understanding of the literacy practices embedded in local community participation. We have further explored several ways that educators have moved from theory to practice in including popular culture, sociocultural language pedagogies, and youth participatory action research into classroom literacy instruction.

I would like to conclude, though, with a return to the basic transaction between teachers and students that is at the heart of any meaningful pedagogy. None of the sociocultural theory matters if students and their families are not viewed as competent and capable individuals who in most cases want very badly to succeed in school and in life. Literacy education is always tied to civic agency, to professional employability, and to power and access. Those who have the privilege of being literacy educators, then, wield great power; a power we can often choose to share or withhold from students, families, and communities. And we have to admit that inequities in literacy education stem from low expectations and not just a lack of knowledge about cultural contexts or learning theory. If we pretend that the issue is a lack of knowledge, then we do not have to confront ugly issues like racism that may have an impact on literacy achievement. Powerful teaching is an act of love. It is, when working with historically marginalized groups, also an act of resistance. When we talk about the knowledge base needed for powerful literacy instruction, we also have to talk about anti-racism and critical consciousness so that we can remember why we have the inequity that exists and so that we can be vigilant about remedying these problems for future generations.

**References**


