In this chapter, we examine how variation in spoken and written language, as well as variation in the use of language across contexts, impacts (a) students’ literacy learning, and (b) the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of teachers and teacher educators. In the first part of this chapter we explore theoretical conceptions of language, literacy, and learning. This background frames our later discussion of empirical work. Next, we articulate the data sources and procedures we drew on for this chapter. Finally, we introduce, discuss, and analyze pertinent empirical studies that were conducted in the past decade since we wrote a previous handbook chapter on this topic (i.e., Brock, Boyd, & Moore, 2002).

Literacy, Learning, and Language Variation

Our goals in this section are twofold. First, we present positioning theory as the lens we use to interpret the studies we review in this chapter. Second, we explicate key language-related concepts that we draw on as we analyze and interpret the studies we present in this chapter.

Positioning Theory

According to sociocultural theorists, human learning in general, and literacy learning, in particular, is facilitated through effectively mediated social interactions (Cole, 1996; Moll, 1997; Wertsch, 1998). Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher psychological processes, such as those involved in literacy learning, occur first in interactions with others. Then, over time, they are appropriated within an individual. That is, learning does not happen merely “in the head” of the learner. Rather, interactions with others shape the very nature of the unique knowledge and ideas about the world that learners can construct. Since these interactions occur through language, language plays a central role in shaping the literacy learning opportunities that are constructed in social interactions.

Positioning theory—a theory within the broader family of sociocultural theories—draws attention to the manner in which conversants use sign systems, in general, and language, in particular, to act and interact together (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). According to Harré and Gillett (1994), a position is “a set of rights, duties, and obligations as a speaker” (p. 35). Davies and Harré (1990) suggest that positioning in oral and written conversations must be understood in terms of: (a) conversants’ purposes and what they say and do in relation to the social context in which they converse, (b) culturally-determined ways of perceiving interactions among people in different settings across different time frames, and (c) the ways conversants conceive of themselves and of the other participants within a conversation.

According to Harré and his colleagues (1991), there are many different modes of positioning that can occur in written and/or oral conversational encounters. For example, second order positioning is the explicit questioning of storylines such as questioning what the role of teacher or student should be in any given context. Intentional positioning is striving to position oneself or others in intentional ways. Modes of positioning are worth examining because they indicate who says what, who listens, and various consequences of interactions for speakers and listeners. Because the manner in which varieties of language are positioned plays an important role in understanding the speakers of language varieties, we use positioning theory, in general, and modes of positioning, in particular, to interpret the studies we review for this chapter (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

Social/Cultural Conceptions of Language and Language Variation

Halliday (1993) suggests that “learning is learning to mean, and to expand one’s meaning potential” (p. 113). Learners “learn to mean” about any given phenomenon through language. Since language plays a central role in learning, we explore some of the many complexities of language. However, because we are interested in factors that impact the language that children and teachers speak and write as well as the ways that the language backgrounds
of children and teachers impact their literacy learning and teaching, we draw on the work of scholars (e.g., Gee, 1996; Halliday, 1993; Wardhaugh, 1998; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006) who stress the importance of studying how language is used in social contexts.

Language scholars have long maintained that language variation refers to the non-uniform nature of language (Hymes, 1974; Wardhaugh, 1998; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). Language varies with respect to “sociocultural characteristics of groups of people such as their cultural background, geographical location, social class, gender, or age” (Wolfram et al., 1999, p. 1). When a variety of language is shared by a group of speakers, linguists refer to the language variety as a dialect (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). According to Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006):

Languages are invariably manifested through their dialects, and to speak a language is to speak some dialect of that language. In this technical usage, there are no particular social or evaluative connotations to the term—that is, there are no inherently “good” or “bad” dialects; dialect is simply how we refer to any language variety that typifies a group of speakers within a language. (p. 2)

When defining dialects, or language varieties, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) emphasize that linguists strive to use the term in a “neutral” (p. 2) way emphasizing how social groups use language varieties in shared ways. However, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) are quick to point out that non-language scholars in the general public often have misconceptions about dialects. For example, a popular non-academic myth is that a “dialect is something that someone else speaks”; however, linguists argue that “everyone who speaks a language speaks some dialect of the language because it is not possible to speak a language without speaking a dialect of the language” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006, pp. 8–9). In short, dialects, and perceptions of dialects, are social constructions; different individuals and groups—depending on their motives and beliefs—position dialects, and the people who speak them, in different ways (e.g., positive, neutral, or negative) (Alim & Baugh, 2007; Wolfram et al., 1999).

Results and Discussion

Our current search yielded 16 studies pertaining specifically to the topics of dialect/language variation, literacy, and teacher education. (Recall that during our last search 10 years ago, there were only a few studies pertaining specifically to literacy and dialect/language variation.) We grouped the current studies into the following four categories: early and upper-level literacy and dialect/language variation (five studies), adolescent literacy and dialect/language variation (four studies), teacher education, literacy, and dialect/language variation (five studies), and large-scale reform efforts pertaining to literacy and dialect/language variation (two studies).

Using positioning theory (e.g., Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) as a theoretical lens to analyze this body of studies, we address the following questions: (a) How do the researchers of the focus studies position the students and the language varieties they speak in their work? and (b) How do the researchers of the focus studies position the teachers with whom the students work? This section is divided into four major sub-sections. First, we examine the studies that focus on the students and their language varieties. Then, we use positioning theory to critique those studies. Second, we examine the studies that focus on the teachers with whom the students work. Then, we use positioning theory to critique those studies.

The Studies: How Students and their Language Varieties Were Positioned Of the 16 studies we reviewed, six did not focus specifically on PreK through Grade 12 students; the five teacher education studies and one of the large-scale reform studies pertained more specifically to
teacher learning. We placed the 10 remaining studies into two broad categories based on our interpretation of how students and their varieties of language in the studies were viewed by the researchers who conducted the studies. That is, researchers in six of the studies viewed the students and their language varieties in highly contextualized ways in their classrooms and/or communities. Researchers in the other four studies viewed students in relation to their use of language features.

Research that Viewed Students and Their Language Varieties as Contextualized in Their Classrooms and/or Communities. We discerned two general themes with respect to the findings of the six studies in this category. First, student learning is promoted when teachers examine and critique their own beliefs and practices with respect to language variation and literacy (Fox, 2005; Godley, Carpenter, & Werner, 2007; Grote, 2006; & Jones, 2006). All four of the studies that reached this conclusion involved in-depth, long-term examinations of students’ learning. Jones’s (2006) 3-year ethnography focused on the literacy learning of seven White girls from “working-poor” background in grades 2 through 4. Fox (2005) took a retrospective look at a 1980s large-scale language reform project—which included numerous studies of the reform process over several years—even on an island in the Caribbean. Grote (2006) and Godley et al. (2007) each conducted yearlong qualitative investigations that involved hundreds of hours of participant observation and interviewing of six girls who spoke Aboriginal English (Grote, 2006) and 31 students who spoke African American English (Godley et al., 2007).

A second theme we discerned as we analyzed the studies in this category is that teachers must understand and build on students’ home language practices in their literacy instruction (Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Bryan, 2004; Fox, 2005; & Jones, 2006). For example, in their in-depth case study of a small group of African American children who lived on an island off the coast of South Carolina and spoke an island dialect, Blake and Van Sickle (2001), began their study with the underlying premise: The teachers/researchers would need to learn the island dialect and use their knowledge of it to help the adolescents in their literacy class learn to speak and write a more standard version of English. Thus, not only did Blake and Van Sickle provide meaningful instruction to their students (e.g., writing workshop, dialogue journals, etc.), they learned about the children’s island language and culture and drew upon what they learned to help their students learn a version of Standard English. In a similar vein, Fox (2005) reported a series of four studies that took place on a Caribbean island nation that changed the medium of instruction in the nation’s schools from English to Creole (the native language of most of the islanders). Fox (2005) found that when Creole-speaking children started their formal education in Creole rather than English and then began learning a dialect of Standard English they were much more successful academically than their Creole-speaking counterparts who began their instruction learning Standard English even when the latter group had significantly more instruction in Standard English.

Research that Viewed Students in Relation to Their Use of Language Features. Researchers in four of the studies we reviewed looked at the students in their studies less holistically and more in terms of how they used particular language features (Clacher, 2004; McDonald, Connor, & Craig, 2006; Terry, 2006; Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004). All four have several features in common; they all involve researchers administering standardized language assessments to large numbers of students. A common thread across all four of the studies (e.g., Clacher, 2004; McDonald et al., 2006; Terry, 2006; & Thompson et al., 2004) is that children in all of these studies demonstrated flexibility and metalinguistic awareness in their language use. For example, testing 92 African American first through third graders who spoke African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Terry found that students had difficulty spelling dialect-sensitive orthographic patterns. Terry (2006) posited that this might have been because students had not seen—or studied in written form at school—the oral AAVE forms and patterns that were familiar to them. Like Terry, Thompson et al. (2004) noted differences in the ways that the 50 African American third grade students in their study used oral and written language; most students’ use of AAVE decreased from the oracy to the written literacy tasks in which they engaged. The researchers posited that this was because the students had likely not seen AAVE in written form at school; thus, they may have been likely to assume that written AAVE is neither used nor sanctioned at school.

Theoretical Critique: How Researchers Positioned Students and their Language Varieties. Figure 12.1 provides an overview of the nature of positioning relative to the 10 focus studies of students and their dialects. The first column in Figure 12.1 provides an overview of the 10 studies in this section. The second column lists the types of positioning relative to the focus studies, and the third column provides a brief definition of the types of positioning listed in the second column.

The researchers in the first six studies listed in Figure 12.1 (i.e., Bryan, 2004; Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Fox, 2005; Godley et al., 2007; Grote, 2006; & Jones, 2006) engage in second order positioning of the students and their language varieties. All question the status quo that it is the responsibility of parents to send children to school speaking a standard variety of the sanctioned language (whether it be Standard Australian English, Standard American English, Standard Modern Greek, or Standard Jamaican English) and with a White, middle-class upbringing. Researchers in these first six studies argue that is the responsibility of educators to value and honor all students and to learn the language varieties that they bring to their classrooms.

The researchers in these first six studies also engage in accountive positioning with respect to the language varieties the students in their studies speak. That is, these
researchers assert that the language varieties the students in their studies speak are stigmatized negatively, but they also argue that they should not be viewed in this manner. For example, Bryan (2004) argued that progress is being made in Jamaican schools towards understanding the value of Jamaican Creole as a viable, rule-governed language variety. An important implication of viewing the students and their languages as the researchers in these studies view them is that this work is additive (Valenzuela, 1999). These researchers advocate valuing the languages and cultures that children bring to school and building upon them in positive ways.

We see much more tacit positioning with respect to the students and their languages in the last four studies listed in Figure 12.1 (i.e., Clacher, 2004; McDonald, Connor, & Craig, 2006; Terry, 2006; Thompson et al., 2004). While the students were positioned explicitly as speakers of different language varieties who were metalinguistically aware, they were tacitly positioned as language users in classroom contexts. That is, because the students were discussed only with respect to isolated language tasks, the reader does not have a clear sense of how the researchers viewed students in the broader communicative contexts of their classrooms or how the findings of these studies might impact classroom teaching and learning. AAVE was also tacitly positioned as inferior to Standard English by several researchers. For example, the stated goal of McDonald et al. (2006) was to examine why African American students are not as successful as their White peers. Because the researchers only viewed the students’ isolated use of AAVE, it seems logical that these researchers viewed AAVE as “the problem.”

If they felt that there were other reasons for the African American students’ lack of success, they would likely have directed the focus of their work to explore something else. They might, for example, have studied the ways that the teachers of the students in the study scaffolded (or not) the students’ learning of Standard English. They could also have studied whether or not the schools in their work prioritized the use of Standard English at the expense of other language varieties that students speak.

The Studies: How Researchers Positioned Teachers of Students who Speak Different Language Varieties. Nine of the 16 studies focused on some aspect of teacher learning (Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Bryan, 2004; Cahill & Collard, 2003; Fogel & Ehri, 2006; Godley et al., 2007; LeMoine & Hollie, 2007; Papapavlou & Pavlos, 2005; Pavlos & Papapavlou, 2004; Vriend Van Duinen & Wilson, 2008).

We divided these nine studies into two general categories. One category included six of the nine studies that documented teachers’ learning, and their changing instructional practices across time, with respect to language variation and literacy learning as that work was contextualized in classrooms and/or school districts (i.e., Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Bryan, 2004; Cahill & Collard, 2003; & Godley et al., 2007; LeMoine & Hollie, 2007; Vriend Van Duinen & Wilson, 2008). The second category included three studies that explored isolated aspects of teacher learning and/or beliefs (i.e., Fogel & Ehri, 2006; Papapavlou & Pavlos, 2005; Pavlos & Papapavlou, 2004).

We discerned two general themes as we analyzed the six studies in this category. First, three of the studies highlighted teachers’ understandings of important relationships between language, identity, and broader cultural contexts and practices (Bryan, 2004; Vriend Van Duinen & Wilson, 2008; Cahill & Collard, 2003). For example, Vriend Van Duinen includes study of the topic of language variation in her pre-service teacher education course. She uses children’s literature with authentic dialects (e.g., Appalachian English & AAVE) as one way to help the pre-service teachers in her classes come to understand language variation. In the context of their work together, the author and her students came to realize important relationships between language and identity; they learned that dialects are more than merely “different words and grammatical patterns…[T]hey involve discourse patterns impossible to mimic by those who don’t understand the language as part of their identity” (Vriend Van Duinen & Wilson, 2008, p. 33).

A second theme we discerned relative to teacher learning about language variation and literacy was the importance of exploring instructional practices in-depth and across time (Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Godley et al., 2007; LeMoine & Hollie, 2007). For example, working with teachers and students over a 3-year period of time on one of South Carolina’s Sea Islands where many students spoke a dia-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Types of Positioning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bryan, 2004</td>
<td>Second order positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Second order positioning involves the explicit questioning of “typical” storylines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Blake &amp; Van Sickle, 2001</td>
<td>Accountive positioning with respect to the language varieties the students speak</td>
<td>Accountive positioning refers to examining the positioning that occurs in a specific context</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Fox, 2005</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Godley et al., 2007</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Grote, 2006</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Jones, 2006</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Clacher, 2004</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. McDonald et al. 2006</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Terry, 2006</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Thompson et al., 2004</td>
<td>Tacit positioning of the students and their language varieties</td>
<td>Tacit positioning is not striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
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lect of AAVE, Blake and Van Sickle (2001) found that a combination of meaningful instruction implemented across a significant period of time—while honoring and learning children’s dialect and culture in the process—brought about the most positive student learning outcomes. LeMoine and Hollie (2007) noted similar results in their work studying a vast and in-depth professional development project in Los Angeles that included a two-pronged approach to facilitating teacher learning about literacy and language variation (a) extensive instruction in quality literacy instructional practices (e.g., effective use of writing workshop, dialogue journals, reader response, etc.), and (b) systematic instruction in linguistics and language variety drawing on the work of language scholars such as Geneva Smitherman. In short, teacher learning was most significant when instruction was meaningful, in-depth, and conducted over time.

Research that Viewed Teachers in Less Contextualized Ways. The three studies in this category viewed teacher attitude and learning in much more isolated ways. For example, two researchers (i.e., Papapavlou & Pavlos, 2005; Pavlos & Papapavlou, 2004) administered surveys to 133 elementary teachers randomly selected from 14 elementary schools to explore their attitudes towards Greek Cypriot Elementary teachers randomly selected from 14 elementary schools to explore their attitudes towards Greek Cypriot Dialect (GCD)\(^1\) as compared to Standard Modern Greek (SMG). They found that Cypriot children entering school have certain literacy practices that are neither appreciated nor utilized by teachers in the schools, and more than half of the teachers surveyed do not have negative attitudes towards GCD.

Fogel and Ehri (2006) sought to explore ways to teach teachers about AAVE dialect forms so that they could more effectively work with dialect speakers in their classrooms. Participants (73 teachers currently enrolled in 3 master’s-level teacher education programs) were divided into one of three conditions: (a) exposure to text written in AAVE, (b) instruction in dialect transformation strategies, and (c) guided practice with feedback in the use of these strategies. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the teachers in the third condition showed the most gains in post-tests.

**Theoretical Critique: How Researchers Positioned Teachers of Students Who Speak Non-Standard Dialects** Figure 12.2 provides an overview of the nature of the positioning relative to the nine focus studies of teachers of students who speak non-standard dialects. The first column in Figure 12.2 provides an overview of the nine studies in this section. The second column lists the types of positioning relative to the focus studies. Note in the second column that studies 1 through 6 all involve accountive and second-order positioning. However, only studies 4, 5, and 6 involve self-positioning. The third column provides a brief definition of the types of positioning listed in the second column.

We noted three kinds of positioning in the first six studies we reviewed in this sub-section that were highly contextualized in classrooms, schools, and/or districts (i.e., Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Bryan, 2004; Cahill & Collard, 2003; & Godley et al., 2007; LeMoine & Hollie, 2007; Vriend Van Duinen & Wilson, 2008). First, all six of these studies involved accountive positioning because all of them involved talking about, or examining, the ways that teachers were positioned (either by themselves or others) to do their work. Second, all six studies in the first sub-section involved second order positioning because the teachers (and/or the teachers’ colleagues involved in the studies) questioned the ways the teachers had been teaching their children about language variation and literacy. Moreover, the teachers in all of these studies sought to make positive changes in their practices, and part of the goal of the research—in all six cases—was to document the nature of those changes to discern what worked and what did not.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Blake &amp; Van Sickle, 2001</td>
<td><strong>Accountive positioning</strong> with respect to the teachers who work with students who speak non-standard language varieties</td>
<td><strong>Accountive positioning</strong> refers to examining the positioning that occurs in a specific context</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Bryan, 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. LeMoine &amp; Hollie, 2007</td>
<td><strong>Second order positioning</strong> of the teachers who work with students who speak non-standard language varieties</td>
<td><strong>Second order positioning</strong> involves the explicit questioning of “typical” storylines</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Cahill &amp; Collard, 2003</td>
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<td><strong>Self-positioning</strong> refers to situating oneself in a conversational encounter</td>
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<td>5. Godley et al., 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Vriend Van Duinen &amp; Wilson, 2008</td>
<td><strong>Intentional positioning</strong> of teachers who work with students who speak non-standard language varieties</td>
<td><strong>Other positioning</strong> refers to situating someone else in a conversational exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Fogel &amp; Ehri, 2006</td>
<td><strong>Other positioning</strong> of teachers who work with students who speak non-standard language varieties</td>
<td><strong>Intentional positioning</strong> is striving to position oneself or others in an intentional way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Papapavlou &amp; Pavlou, 2005</td>
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Figure 12.2 Positioning relative to nine focus studies of teachers of non-standard dialect speakers.
work to promote student learning. Finally, three of the studies involved self-positioning because they were teacher research studies whereby the teachers positioned themselves as researchers exploring, critiquing, and commenting on their own practice.

The two primary kinds of positioning we noted in the last category of three less-contextualized studies were intentional positioning and other positioning (i.e., Fogel & Ehri, 2006; Papapavlou & Pavlos, 2005; Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2004). All three studies involved intentional positioning because the researchers in the two studies (i.e., Papapavlou & Pavlos, 2005; Pavlos & Papapavlou, 2004) sought to understand teachers’ beliefs and instructional practices pertaining to Greek Cypriot, and the teachers in the Fogel and Ehri (2006) study were intentionally positioned because the researchers sought to determine which of three conditions was most effective. All three of these studies also involved other positioning because the researchers positioned the teachers and their beliefs and actions in their studies.

What immediately stands out to us as we look across these two sets of studies is that much more agency is present in the first six studies as compared to the latter three. That is, the teachers in the first six studies are positioning themselves to enter scholarly conversations about language variation and literacy learning. Moreover, these teachers (and the researchers with whom they work) seek to explore how they can change their instructional practices to more effectively teach all of the children in their classrooms. The positioning in the second set of three studies is much more passive; it reports what teachers currently think about language variation and literacy learning (Papapavlou & Pavlos, 2005; Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2004) as well as what can be done with teachers (i.e., the third treatment condition outlined in Fogel & Ehri, 2006) to promote their learning about literacy and language variation. In short, the first set of six studies is more dynamic and agentive; these studies explore changing practices across time side-by-side with the teachers in the work. The second set of three studies is more passive and static; the researchers look at teachers (rather than working with them) and explore what is (rather than what could or might be).

**Concluding Comments**

As we conducted this review of literature 10 years after our first literature review on this topic, we were heartened to see more studies pertaining specifically to language variation and literacy learning. We are especially excited to see scholarship whereby teacher educators are studying issues of language variation and literacy learning in their pre- and in-service courses. While progress has clearly been made in our field in the last decade, much work remains to be done in at least four general areas. First, given that teachers in most of the schools in the studies we reviewed from around the world speak and write versions of the standard dialects in those societies, teachers (and teacher educators, too, of course) have much to learn about the structures of different dialects and their relations to varieties of standard dialects. Second, all of us as educators, teacher educators, and researchers have much to learn about how we can foster not only an understanding of—but the valuing of—the multiple dialects used in schools and society. The work of Cahill and Collard (2003) is helpful in this regard. Their objective is not just for all students and teachers to learn Standard Australian English, but also for students and teachers to develop bi-dialectical expertise. They, like other scholars such as Vriend Van Duinen and Wilson (2008) recognize the complex interplay between language (and language varieties) and culture in shaping identity. Third, all of us still have much to learn about how we can provide meaningful richly contextualized instructional practices that foster bi-dialecticalism. Finally, our theoretical bent is studying the teaching and learning of language variation and literacy is its social and cultural contexts. We believe that the work we reviewed for this chapter that is contextualized in meaningful social and cultural contexts provides richer answers to the complex questions we face about quality literacy instruction as it relates to issues of language variation.

**Notes**

1. Please note that Greek Cypriot Dialect (GCD) is considered the stigmatized dialect in this context and Standard Modern Greek (SMG) is considered the “standard” dialect in this context. That is, GCD tends to be viewed negatively by those who speak SMG.

**References**


