I begin this chapter with a brief description of five 12-year-old boys and girls as they discuss a life experience having to do with chickens. Their families are headed by adults who have lived in Appalachian towns and urban centers for several generations, or who have immigrated to the United States and Midwest during the past 3 years. The children and I met weekly in the school library to participate in what we called “story club,” an informal gathering, where the children could tell stories to entertain one another, ask questions, describe their worldviews, and challenge social and academic rules about identities, learning, and living in a global society.

We are sitting around a rectangular table in their school library. Having finished their lunches, they are peering at a page in Carmen Lomas Garza’s book, *Family Pictures: Cuadros de Familia* (2005), in which an older woman holds a chicken by the neck above her shoulder, while a man and several children look on. I had just opened the book to this page when Tomás leaned across the table, his head close to the book, and pointed to each figure in the picture, saying, “That’s my aunt, and that’s my uncle. And those are my cousins.”

“Wait!” says James, “That’s your aunt?”

Tomás continues, “That’s what we do. We swing it like this.” He imitates the practiced motion of swinging the chicken overhead, using his wrist and lower arm, holding his shoulder in place. Chris joins in the motion, and also leans across the table toward the picture, “Yeah. At my grandpa’s that’s what we did, too.”

James repeats his question to Tomás, “That’s your aunt? That’s your family?”

Tomás responds, shrugging, “Could be.”

Then James quietly asks, “Where are you from?”

But Chris continues an enactment of killing a chicken before Tomás can respond. I turned to Habib and Sara and asked if they have killed chickens too. They smile and nod, and Habib says emphatically, “Oh yeah. And I don’t like it.”

In this brief excerpt, it is clear that, despite their diverse geographic origins, several of the children shared experiences of killing chickens, and they could proudly mimic adults’ actions as depicted in the painting. In the midst of their descriptions, James and Tomás considered what it means to be “in a book” set in Southwest Texas and at the same time, live in the Midwest. “Could be,” suggests Tomás. His own family experiences were so accurately represented they could have been, in his view, the subjects of Lomas Garza’s painting.

Explaining oneself to others, especially in a highly diverse community where children are uncertain about the rules of belonging, requires selective use of language, cultural resources, and interpretive practices (Li, 2008; Campano, 2007; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008). Story club provided a regular time and place where children could figure out what to share in their stories and how they could listen to and question others’ tales. Over 5 months of meetings, patterns of form and content unfolded in their tellings, and their recognition of one another’s sense of place, history, and identity was formed and reformed through their talk, questions, related stories, and popular cultural references.

As these children participated in story telling events, they learned to structure their experiences for their particular audience of peers, to participate in story club practices, to select and use their cultural resources, multilingual resources, and to understand social relations to co-create new knowledge about story telling, their lives, and one another.

As I organized and planned for this club’s regular meetings, I was informed by sociocultural theory, and its close relative, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), as well as the extensive literacy research that has grown from these theories since the mid-1970s (Cole, 1996; Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000; Martínez-Roldan, 2005; Mehan, 1979;
Rogoff, 2003; Scribner & Cole, 1981). My research also relies on insights from cultural studies, poststructural theory, and theories of identity and globalization, but is always framed by overarching sociocultural principles of learning (Enciso, 2007). Literacy, in this view, develops through relationships within social practices, across locations, and is expressed and refined through participants’ references to specific social histories, tacit knowledge, and opportunities for problem-solving (Moje & Lewis 2007; DeNicolo & Fránquiz, 2006; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008).

In this chapter I place the story club’s practices and their implications for literacy education in the context of three principles of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1972, 1978) that explain relationships among language, learning, and society: (a) thought is mediated by social, historical relations and activity, (b) the potential to learn is optimal within situations where a problem makes use of and extends the language, knowledge, motivation and relationships already available to learners, and (c) language and other sign systems are historically and culturally developed through social interaction but become available for individuals as a form of inner control over immediate and future activity. The first principle deals generally with the concept of mediation and the historically formed social activities that lend meaning, materials, and direction to conceptual understanding. The second principle builds on an understanding of mediation but focuses on the specific site and mechanism of teaching and learning as a “zone of proximal development” (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978); that is, a site for problem-solving with others. The ZPD requires transformation of language, signs, and tools so that tacit knowledge or ‘hunches’ are extended and made explicit for new learning. The third principle of sociocultural theory posits language as the quintessential mediating resource or sign for learning which is, itself, mediated by the historical and political meanings circulating within social situations and societies. I conclude with a discussion of more recent interpretations and analyses of sociocultural theory—including Bakhtin’s (1981) post-structural philosophy of language, identity, and authorship (Dyson, 2004; Juzwick, 2004; Wertsch, 1991)—and their implications for pedagogy, equity, and achievement in language arts education.

Social Mediation of Learning

In 1924, when Vygotsky joined Luria and Leontieff in Moscow at the Institute of Psychology, the field of psychology was dominated by behavioral theorists who assumed that stimuli-response research could explain the nature of human cognition. Vygotsky argued that mind and behavior could not be understood separately (Vygotsky & Luria, 1930; Luria, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978), and that complex thought could not be understood through behavioral training. Thus, Vygotsky established a new direction for the study of higher order thinking. He argued that conceptual development requires awareness and control of ideas, not only repetition. Social interaction and use of materials enable extensions and connections of everyday or spontaneous knowledge to broader, more stable understandings of mathematical, literary, or scientific concepts. Without completely rejecting the effects of stimuli in concept development, Vygotsky argued that the world is constantly stimulating and, therefore, must be made meaningful and useful in the context of actions shared by people who develop and use historically developed cultural knowledge. Such goal-directed interaction, in his view, was not a matter of an individual making choices, detached from others’ social practices, histories, or interests. Rather each person’s understanding was mediated by socially-culturally developed tools and signs that could be used to interpret and act with others in the world.

Based on research with child-adult dyads, Vygotsky established the principle that development or conceptual change is enacted socially before it appears individually:

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: First, on the social level, and later, on the individual level. First it appears between people (interpsychological), and then within the child (intrapsychological)...All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

He argued, further, that social interaction and signs are not static variables in a context, but are transformed as they are subsequently made available in new situations, creating a history of mediating signs and practices within social organizations and in each person. For Vygotsky, learning through the use of mediated signs is mutually constitutive of the social situation, the sign, and the individuals participating in an activity.

Many well-known ethnographic studies of relationships between home and classroom language and literacy practices (cf. Au, 1980; Heath, 1983; Wells, 1986; Cazden, 1988/2001; Mehan, 1979; McDermott, 1993) share the underlying assumptions of Vygotsky’s argument that learning is inherently social. Descriptions of literacy learning, therefore, depend on close observations of social life involving mediating artifacts (e.g., books, letters, pictures, music) in formal and informal settings. Researchers have also shown how students’ knowledge and participation in learning are selected and evaluated in school, and thus, how learning is invariably tied to the politics and biases of institutionalized literacy practices (Bloom & Egan-Robertson, 1993). Too often, the rich, distinctive interactions researchers documented in home settings were (and continue to be) dismissed as wrong or useless in school settings. Instead of understanding learning as socially mediated practice, schools are typically organized around the assumption that one monolithic, ‘standardized’ way of speaking, interacting, and building conceptual knowledge is natural and, therefore, meaningful and right for everyone. Thus, the forms of participation in learning that non-dominant children bring to school are viewed as
suspect rather than as historically rich signs and practices for mediating new ideas.

**The Politics of Social Mediation and Literacy Education** Extending Vygotsky’s ideas, Street (1995) argues that social activities are culturally and historically produced, including how people interpret, share, and value texts. As such, literacy acts and materials are politically and historically constituted and therefore, ideological. In schools and communities, people use texts and literacy practices to accomplish social activities that often have implications for what—and who—will be regarded as meaningful, powerful, or worthwhile. In contrast to this ideological approach to literacy, an autonomous view makes no reference to social relationships or the historically formed practices associated with using texts (Street, 1995). Instead, it assumes a universal, neutral context for all participants’ literacy and learning.

From a sociocultural standpoint, an autonomous viewpoint disregards the cultural resources that inform and transform students’ and their communities’ literacy education.

The children in the story club were expected to conform to autonomous school policies that required them to focus on a district literacy curriculum. However, the story club research operated outside these restrictions, and could actively solicit children’s histories with texts, tales, and languages and created new opportunities to express and examine inter-and intra-cultural knowledge.

**Creating Mediating Contexts for Culturally Responsive Literacy Education** Sociocultural theorists argue, with Street, that learning and literacy development are not universal, but are mediated by and made evident in the transformation of participation in activity (Rogoff, 2003). Following these ideas as well as principles of cultural psychology (Cole 1996), González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) and a team of teachers initiated a study of the “funds of knowledge” in a community of Latino adults that they hoped could ground students’ learning in classrooms. Their work documented the community’s expertise, literacy practices, and social relations as forms of distributed knowledge and socially mediated learning. They then used this data for curricular designs that recognized and extended children’s knowledge, forming confianza or mutual trust among members of the community, teachers, and researchers.

In the process of documenting and transforming community knowledge for their classrooms, teachers, working as members of the research team, redefined literacy as an inquiry process “for action, as situated by the nature of the activities developed by both teachers and students.” Through their co-construction of a new culture of learning, teachers learned to view students as “…displaying competence, within the expanded possibilities for action made available by exceeding the limits of tightly prescribed lessons…” (Moll, 2005, p. 284).

The process of rethinking curricular and social networks also challenged and shaped teachers’ perceptions of themselves, so that their identities shifted from an individual “teacher” to one of community member associated with families and a team of researchers. According to Moll (2005), teachers’ professional identity development is crucial to sustaining long term change in literacy education in communities. By recognizing different ways of mediating knowledge, it was possible for participants to define and develop new social and conceptual relationships.

**Mediating Systems and Contradictions: An overview of CHAT** Moll and his colleagues’ research design and practices were located across communities that could be understood as historically formed systems of mediation (Leontiev, 1978). Similarly, in my research, the children’s storytelling during story club, though located in the library during lunchtime, was not simply removed from the space, history, or practices of their school and community activity systems. The children often pointed out the differences between their literacy experiences in their regular classrooms and those they developed during story club. Following cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), a significant extension of Vygotsky’s principle of social mediation (Luria, 1976, 1993; Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 1996; Cole, 1996; Miettinen, 2006), our group’s activity was shaped by attention to the contradictions and tensions we perceived between the practices of school, home life, and the story worlds they remembered and imagined. According to Engeström (1996), contradictory rules, materials, and goals can drive participants to seek new purposes, uses of materials, and forms of interaction. In addition, activities and their relation to other systems can achieve an expansive cycle of reflection and change as participants examine the sources of contradiction (Engeström, 1996). Disagreements about the facts often arose as the children’s stories intersected with one another’s histories and values, and with the history of rules, materials, divisions of labor and goals organized at the school, district, state, and national levels (Gutiérrez, Hunter, & Arzubiga, 2009).

**Learning as Potential**

The second principle of sociocultural theory proposes that change in individual development cannot be accounted for through biological or individually constructed concepts. Rather, social life, activity, tools, signs, and imagination drive learning; waiting for a child to be conceptually capable of developing more systematic control of ideas only isolates them from opportunities to use language and socially-mediated activity in new ways. Vygotsky argued that learning could precede development. He observed that when children and adults worked together, using available signs, especially language, they solved problems and developed concepts beyond the child’s immediate capabilities, but within reach for future learning. Thus, learning is oriented to the child’s potential in a changing world located within the social interaction established by participants in social situations.

Vygotsky’s work on zones of proximal development (1978) often focused on children’s engagement in imagina-
tive play. In play, rules are borrowed from everyday life. That is, pretending to be a sister invites the players to find out what sister means. To find out what something means requires thinking beyond the given, concrete materials within a visual field and replacing “what is” with “what if.” Similarly, reading and interpreting texts requires us to bring another world into view. A play-like approach creates a socially vibrant space for inventing and examining the meanings of words and worlds.

The ZPD also represents an optimistic space where a more capable other, whether a peer or adult, is able to guide a novice in the meaning and use of a concept that would otherwise be left to spontaneous learning. These guides or scaffolds for learning are intended to be “temporary, adjustable frameworks for construction-in-progress...” (Cazden, 1996, p. 168). Without this flexibility, the dynamic mediation of knowledge between individuals and social life might become a rigid structure that assumes knowledge in one participant can be transmitted to another.

Complicating the Zone While Vygotsky’s theory introduces a mechanism for learning, it does not specify how participants should create such a space (Gee 1996a). In literacy education, many have argued that guided instruction is crucial for the development of metalanguages and meta-awareness of the ways texts work so that reading and writing can become internalized as natural, yet self-aware processes (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Czikó, & Hurwitz, 1999). However, as Delpit (1988) and Willis (1995, 2008), among others (Bruner, 1996; Jiménez, 2000; Orellana, 2009; Tatum, 2008), have argued, metalanguages and meta-awareness are not culturally or politically neutral. What teachers count as good writing or proficient reading is likely to depend on normative assumptions, and, therefore, set teachers’ and students’ complex social practices and expectations in conflict with one another. Too often, teachers’ implicit language practices are misunderstood by children and result in teachers’ low assessments of children’s knowledge and skills. And yet, as shown in a study of classroom discourse practices by Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) when teachers’ and students’ interactions are highly structured for explicit learning goals, “…participation in joint activity [can be] so restricted that fundamental educational goals are subsumed and often subverted to ensure the control associated with ‘appropriate’ socialization” (p. 445). In other words, the zone of proximal development is lost as classroom interaction is reduced to social control rather than negotiation of meaning and knowledge.

Indeed, for many urban African American and Latino students, their schools’ primary focus is on surveillance of behavior rather than on disciplinary knowledge development. Carol Lee’s theory of Cultural Modeling (2007) addressed this gap in the domain of literary study by applying Vygotskian principles of mediation and conceptual development. This model appropriates students’ spontaneous knowledge resources (in this case, everyday linguistic practices using metaphor and imagery) for academic, non-spontaneous understanding in the domain of literary reading and interpretation. Lee developed “cultural data sets” such as familiar metaphors, song lyrics, videos, and short stories recognizable and interesting to students that also held literary analogs for the novels they read and analyzed together. Through reference to cultural data sets and ongoing modeling of the forms of talk and questioning specific to literary understanding, Lee taught ninth grade students who were failing English to take risks with interpretation as they learned to identify and critique literary structures for thematic representations of human dilemmas represented in Morrison’s Beloved (1987). Subsequently, many of these students were asked to enroll in Honors English. Lee’s research exemplifies the kind of institutional, multi-contextual, and culturally specific insights that are needed to create environments for learning complex disciplinary concepts and forms of participation. Based on her multi-year study, Lee argues that teachers should create the conditions for seeking and incorporating students’ cultural knowledge, but with the intention of guiding their experience with and conceptualization of an academic discipline, not merely for the sake of motivating students’ interest.

Creating a Dialogic Learning Zone Learning in a zone of proximal development requires teachers to give as much attention to students’ culturally specific linguistic and knowledge resources as they do to intended disciplinary aims and concepts. When both teachers and students are interested in one another’s ideas and knowledge, it is possible to create a dialogic zone. Based on Bakhtin’s concepts of language and social experience, dialogism points to the many voices and histories of relationships formed through language that are always at play during any social interaction—including teaching and learning. Wells (1999), Wertsch (1991), and other scholars (Edmiston & Enciso, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2001) describe this dialogic zone as one that deliberately includes multiple perspectives, based on individuals’ and communities’ diverse experiences and relations, with attention given to the resulting contradictions and convergences among their ideas. Dialogism is not an end in itself. Rather, learning is most vital and transformative when it occurs as a hybrid intersection of teachers’ and children’s experiences in and out of school “…in which alternative and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning.” (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000, p. 157).

Story club functioned through dialogic discourse that was transformed by, and transformative of, children’s viewpoints and knowledge as it also changed the meaning and practices within a school space that was generally viewed as a place to complete assignments. Although children were usually segregated from one another in school, based in part on English proficiency, in story club they could venture across divides to describe, for example, the ways their families required them to learn and memorize religious texts. As they told stories about memorizing the verses of the Qur’an or biblical Psalms, they recognized the differences in their
cultural histories while commiserating over the additional work involved in complying with adults’ expectations for their religious educations. Their efforts to understand one another reshaped the space imposed by school structures, so they could collaboratively describe and define their multilingual and multi-referential literacy knowledge.

Language as Mediation

The third principle of sociocultural theory is based on Vygotsky’s insight that language development is not supplementary to learning, but is crucial to engagement with the problems posed by new situations. Vygotsky believed that language is the “tool of tools” (1978; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994) for advancing and organizing higher order thought and transforming social relations. By using the symbolic power of language, children and adults are able to mediate the immediacy of a concrete, only-present world: “The creation of an imaginary situation is...the first manifestation of the child’s emancipation from situational constraints” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 99). Spoken and written language, especially in the context of play, create a zone of proximal development in which it is possible to rehearse ideas, formulate plans, imagine ourselves and others as a head taller, and reflect on actions and insights (cf. p.102). To return to story club, the children’s storytelling created imagined worlds that required negotiations of meaning about characters, imagery, and plot trajectories. Through stories, the children were invited to inhabit one another’s worlds which supported their ability to abstract from, and simultaneously reference, their social and linguistic knowledge.

In extensions of Vygotsky’s theory of development and social change, language is viewed not only as a sign for building meaning and memory, but also as a profoundly social, political and personal means for shaping power, identity, and agency (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Jiménez, 2000; Ball & Freedman, 2008; Gee, 1996; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Volosinov, 1929/1973). Language mediates how and what we perceive, but its meaning and use are themselves mediated by cultural activity and historically formed relations with the world.

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) brought together Vygotsky’s concept of language as meditational sign and Bakhtin’s concepts of histories of meaning in language, to construct a more comprehensive view of activity, identity, improvisation in learning, and social change. Central to their synthesis is the concept of “authoring a self,” put forward by Bakhtin (1981) as a way to explain the daily, ongoing experiences we have with language that address us (“That’s your family?”) and for which we are inevitably answerable (“Could be”). Every utterance, according to Bakhtin, is addressed to someone and has a history of relationships with other events, ideas, and identities that people interpret and use as meaningful. Thus, language is never static; it is constantly improvised in relation to new circumstances and configurations of people.

According to Bakhtin, relationships and identities can be altered—or at least questioned—through inversions, rephrasing, tonal, and stylistic shifts in language use. But changing relations of power and identity through face to face interactions requires attention to prevailing discourses or storylines about who people can and cannot be, and how people should and should not act in relation with others. Story club became a place of improvisation, allowing children to ask about each other’s journeys within and outside the U.S., while they also elaborated on these stories with references to the shared language of video games, horror films, and television game shows. To be addressed and answerable as a storyteller, was also to author oneself as a curious and more fully humanized member of the school community.

Holland et al. (1998) argue that daily improvisations and shifts in how we answer or address others through larger, societal storylines can become “ pivots” much like Vygotsky’s mediating signs, and allow us to think and act beyond the immediately imposed constraints of everyday life. Once a pivot is established, it can serve as a future referent or sign; i.e., as a means for rethinking or refiguring discourses and relations of power that oppress, exclude, or diminish oneself and others. Authorship of self, then, has the potential to become available for mediating one’s own and others’ learning and authorship of social life.

Conclusion

Viewed through the lenses of Bakhtin’s authorship, Holland et al.’s (1998) theory of refigured storylines and Vygotsky’s principles of socially formed learning, literacy education is never only about learning to speak, listen, view, compose, interpret, and read a neutral, ahistorical language. Rather, literacy education entails the deliberate construction of mediating spaces, signs, and relationships that will enable all participants to author possible selves and possible worlds, in the service of adaptive, diverse, equitable communities (Freire, 1998).

If minds and texts are social, as Vygotsky suggests, literacy educators should develop a keen understanding of the cultural resources that inform students’ thinking and forms of expression. As argued by the New London Group (1996), if the focus of learning is oriented to planning, problem solving, and building tools and concepts to serve new situations, then literacy education should emphasize students’ use of language and other sign systems in settings where they can interact with other people and engage with increasingly complex needs and concerns. Further, Vygotsky’s emphasis on the critical role of language as a mediating sign for focusing and planning during learning, means that literacy educators must develop pedagogies for interpreting and expanding students’ language-in-use, as they solve problems in their local communities and within worlds they imagine through literature, drama, digital narratives, film, and creative writing.
References


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