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Putting It Into Practice: Moving Forward with Integrating the New Literacy Studies into Literacy Education Once and For All

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Putting It into Practice:

Moving Forward with Integrating the New Literacy Studies into Literacy Education Once and For All

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, the definition of literacy and what it has meant to be considered “literate” has undergone substantial transformation that has distinguished it from solely being able to read or write. Specifically, this new approach to literacy education and practice called the “New Literacy Studies,” (NLS) interrogates the standards that qualifies one as being satisfactory literate against the sociocultural influences that can impact an individual’s literate abilities. This is an interdisciplinary approach to literacy studies that collectively calls upon the research of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists in addition to literacy scholars and educators, but has yet to be formally introduced to literacy education.

Keywords: literacy, New Literacy Studies, marginalized, sociocultural,

Background

Over the past few decades, the definition of literacy and what it has meant to be considered “literate” has undergone substantial transformation that has distinguished it from solely being a matter based on one’s reading or writing abilities. Specifically, this new approach to literacy education called the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS), interrogates the standards that qualifies one as being satisfactory literate against the sociocultural influences that can impact an individual’s literacy. In other words, people learn and use literacy in specific sociocultural contexts, and the ways they use them are associated with relations of power and ideology across socioeconomic status, immigrant status, English language learner status, race, disability, etc. (Green and Kostogriz 2003, p. 103). This is an interdisciplinary approach to literacy studies that
collectively calls upon the research of sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists in addition to literacy scholars and educators, and other intellectuals associated with literacy education.

James Paul Gee in “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction and What is Literacy?” (2001) labels the specialists, academics, and enthusiasts involved in the research of the NLS as individuals’ part of a Discourse, which

are [ways] of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes... Discourses not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse (p. 526).

Assessing the pedagogies associated with NLS from the angle of Discourses is relevant in that it compels literacy research to consider an individual as simply the meeting point of many, sometimes conflicting discourses that are socially and historically defined (Gee 2001, p. 539). Certainly, this can have several implications for someone who hails from a lower socioeconomic background, whose first language was not English, and who identifies with one or more of the marginalized racial groups in the U.S. An objective of the NLS (as well as a reason that the NLS was pushed for as an initiative in literacy education) is to acknowledge the way that social organization creates the conditions for a variety of literacy activities (Scribner and Cole 1981) and literacy events that may often contradict the traditional expectations of literacy that are taught in formal schooling (Heath 1982, p. 94).

It should come as no surprise then, that levels of literacy and literate ability would vary across members of different ethnic groups, age groups, sexes, socioeconomic classes, etc.
(Szwed 1981, p. 423). According to Deborah Brandt’s “Sponsors of Literacy” (1998) considering “…the effects that economic and political changes... [have on] people’s ability to read and write, their chances to sustain that ability, and their capabilities to pass it along to others” (p. 173) as a circumstance of their identities and the communities that they come from also reveals further implications for the way literacy learning is sponsored. These sponsors, which are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (Brandt 1998, p. 166) are linked directly to the sociocultural contexts that the NLS seeks to highlight in contemporary literacy education. It is being able to recognize the ways that literacy is sponsored differently for a student from a middle or upper-class family made up of professors, doctors, or engineers versus a student from a working-class family whose parents may have never finished high school. This would suggest that their accesses to Discourses that extend their literacies as individuals would be based on their birth into the right set of socio-economic circumstances (Parmegiani 2014, p. 30).

However, if the NLS was created at large to reject the notion of autonomy – a set of standards that must be satisfied in order to be required literate – then literacy educators must be able to interrogate their own positionalities as well. As Amy Robillard notes in her article “It’s Time for Class: Toward a More Complex Pedagogy of Narrative” (2003), the primary academic Discourse that students are taught in privileges the abstract and analytical ways of knowing of the already privileged middle-class students and asks them to identify with it (p. 80), which effectively disregards their own foregrounding identities. Further, the effects of adhering to the middle-class values of education is underlined by Lisa Delpit in “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” (1998) when she writes
To provide schooling for everyone’s children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it. Some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place – “cultural capital,” as some critical theorists refer to it – some with less. Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without the arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes (p. 28).

Conversely, students who do not have this “cultural capital” as a result of their marginalized identities, are essentially left to fend for themselves and figure things out, to acquire literacy in ways that oppresses them further. Finding ways to integrate the NLS into contemporary literacy education then, is not only imperative, but also urgent for these particular students as they need to be provided opportunities to develop the embodied capital that will allow them to use their literate abilities to contribute to their upward academic and social mobility (Fairbanks and Ariail 2006, p. 352).

Yet, a question remains in response to the research done about the benefits of adopting the NLS: is literacy education transforming to reflect the ideals that have been reconceptualized via the NLS? Are literacy educators truly beginning to alter their teaching to ensure that they are learning just as much about the ways in which their student’s literacies are impacted by their identities as their students learn from them? A decades old amount of scholarship and research has been dedicated to the perceived benefits of the NLS, but less so exists for the tangible data,
models, and evidence that show the NLS being integrated into literacy education as an actual practice. What’s more, the disparity that exists between NLS research and concrete examples of it being integrated into literacy learning environments means that there is also a lack of, or generally scarce amount of Ethnographic studies and empirical research dedicated to the effects of an NLS-altered curriculum for marginalized students.

As a result, the research presented in this article was done as an effort to start a conversation among literacy educators about approaches to finally adopting NLS ideologies into literacy instruction. Specifically, how can literacy be promoted for marginalized students who hail from communities that lack resources for extending their literate abilities and by extension, upward social mobility? What has become of students who have attempted to acquire literacy in environments where “…the languages, dialects, and literacies that shape their identity constructions and give expression to their world views” have not been welcomed (Paremgiani 2014, p. 25) in their education? How has external forces (separate from their schooling and other academic settings) in their nuclear families and communities impacted their abilities to acquire literacy? These are the questions that I aimed to answer in doing the research for this article, as they have implications that can be immediately applied to NLS integration and curriculum adaptation.

Exigency for Research

As established prior, research dedicated to NLS integration and its effects is still relatively marginal in educational policy and practice, allowing for significant inequities and oppressive ideologies to persist (Green and Kostogriz 2003, p. 103) and delayed understanding of the ways that marginalized student identities intersect and therefore influence literate ability
(note: the term ‘marginalized’ is used in this article with awareness of its broader definition to account for the multitude of marginalized identities that has the potentiality to influence literacy learning). However, there are profound reasons for pushing for literacy education to begin putting the initiatives presented by the NLS to practice.

First, it should be recognized that student success trajectories are constrained by the ways in which institutional agents read them (Fairbanks and Ariail 2006, p. 349), with the ‘institution’ being the schools they attend. This idea has extended consequences for students of marginalized identities as they are quickly labeled as “Other” when they exhibit any sort of learning difficulty or literacy “deficiency” (Green and Kostogriz 2003, p. 104). In the same way, these “othered” students immediately become representatives of their peers of similar identities (Delpit 1998, p. 38), furthering the harmful impact that those labels can have on said students’ success trajectories. As educators teaching in these oppressive institutions, there should be a sense of responsibility to call attention to the “sociocultural dimensions of students’ lives that are not fully represented” (Scherff et al. 2013, p. 109) by traditional education and “emphasize and privilege” (Scherff et al. 2013, p. 110) these dimensions of students’ identities in their instruction. Rather than hastily passing judgement on students who do not meet the required standards of literacy, efforts should be centered on putting one’s self in their student’s shoes and recognizing they don’t all fit the same. There is cultural capital in being an educator in an institution where middle-class values are emphasized, just as there isn’t for students who cannot readily identify with these values.

Lingering on the integration of NLS into environments where literacy is taught denies marginalized students from being able to develop a sociocultural and class consciousness (Robillard 2003, p. 76) that is needed for them to be able to succeed. It is delaying the
possibilities of ethnographic research that could help to broaden existing teacher perspectives (Scribner and Cole 1981, p. 85) and provide concrete models for creating curriculums reflective of NLS for literacy instruction. Currently, the only existing scholarship for framing NLS-inspired literacy education are mostly theoretical; however, theories and philosophies about what NLS could do for the literacies of marginalized students does not give an indication for the limits of the NLS that could arise once it begins to be integrated into classrooms. In order to address these potential drawbacks, a firmer grasp on what an NLS literacy education looks like in practice is needed.

**Methodology**

In addition to finding research material in the form of documents, journal articles, and other scholarly-written work, some self-conducted research in supplement to this was done that will largely be the focus of the rest of the article. Five participants – all full-time college students at a local, private university – were chosen to be interviewed and their responses recorded to be included in this study. The five participants, Ashley, Carmen, Veronica, Molly, and Irene, all identified as women of color and low-income (or hailing from a lower socioeconomic background/family); however, divergences between types of education (i.e. public or private schooling), ethnicity, and location existed among other minor identifiers. Each participant was asked several standard questions (pictured below), but follow-up questions were improvised as needed for elaboration.
After interviews were conducted, participant responses were selectively transcribed in accordance to their relevancy to the main research question: *How can literacy be promoted for marginalized students who hail from communities that lack resources for extending their literate abilities and by extension, upward social mobility?* and the supplemental questions that followed. Lastly, analysis of their responses was divided into groups regarding literacy sponsorship either at home or in school (some participants expressed receiving more support for literacy in one setting more than the other). Responses pertaining to in-school literacy learning sponsorship was also divided into additional sub-groups: in-community schools and out-of-community schools as participant experience also varied in accordance with the types and location of the schools they attended.

**Literacy Attainment at Home**

When few opportunities for acquiring literacy were present in their communities, participants were forced to find “unconventional” ways of doing so. Fortunately, all participants interviewed pointed towards their parents being their first sponsors for literacy which looked different depending on the type of engagement their parents had with their education. For instance, Carmen’s parents were not able to finish school on account of their financial struggles
and family responsibilities when they were younger. In turn, Carmen explained that “…they attempted to instill and emphasize the importance of schooling for their children” which motivated her to strive to be a great student despite her setbacks. Likewise, Molly’s parents did not finish school either, but pushed for Molly and her siblings to read and write from an early age.

Moreover, if one’s parents did know English the burden of attempting to acquire literacy through a new language sometimes rested on both the shoulders of the child and the parent:

Ashley: “…that’s why a lot of parents brought their kids from the DR to go to America – to learn English so that they could help them better…. In Lawrence, even though it is a predominantly a Spanish city, a lot of the letters and whatnot still come in English. So, papers from the bank, papers about healthcare or insurance… that’s where the immigrant parents would have their kids going to school to learn English to help translate the papers for them… The kid became that mediator… It was difficult because you had 10- and 12-year-olds translating things from the doctor…”

Here Ashley speaks about the dynamics between parents that immigrated from DR and their children that required them to take on the role as a translator from young ages. Ashley, whose first language was Spanish, was responsible for teaching her parents to become English-literate as she learned the new language herself. Veronica also gives insight into what this looked like for her mom and her whose first languages were Spanish as well:

“My mom… she would give me magazines that would come home in the mail and she would sound out words with me because we didn’t really have ‘how-to-read’ books growing up.”
Although she did not have access to resources like books or other materials that could help her learn how to read, Veronica and her mother did their best to utilize the resources they had at their disposal, like magazines in the mail to increase her literacy.

Overall, the cases discussed previously not only indicate the significance of recognizing how social, linguistic, and geographical factors may intertwine to shape the print literacy interactions of individuals from low-income backgrounds (Lynch 2009, p. 518), but that these are experiences that should be valued even if “non-traditional.” Despite having language and resource barriers inhibiting them from being able to acquire literacy with the least amount of labor possible, participants and their parents worked hard to find ways around them. Upon NLS integration into school curriculums, the intellects of marginalized families everywhere as they find creative ways to overcoming the bounds of their sociocultural circumstances, will be validate. This would begin changing the definition of literacy into something more inclusive of these lived realities and positively influence the prospects of students alike.

**Literacy Attainment in School**

There were several similarities found among the participants with regards to the resources that they were able access for their educational attainment and literacy learning. For instance, almost every participant recalled a specific teacher in their K through 12 experience that they felt contributed to their success with these factors. Molly spoke avidly about the teacher dynamics she felt best helped her, particularly when she was struggling in school:

“...I definitely could have dropped out. I didn’t go to school and was getting bad grades because a whole bunch of stuff was going on at home. And I went to such a predominantly white school that I felt like no one understood me and half of my teachers...”
just thought I was a lazy high schooler... I probably had something wrong with me, so those teachers who were able to identify that there are other factors in the community and that not everyone has this ‘silver-spoon’ lifestyle – those were the teachers that kept me in school.”

Much of the pressures going on at home for Molly had to do with her background as a mixed, low-income, student attending an otherwise predominantly rich, white high school. Not only does this address the notion of sociocultural contexts and their potentiality to impact literacy learning, but it also shows the positive influence that teachers can have once they notice this correlation.

Likewise, Ashley hails from Lawrence, Massachusetts where the major population is primarily low-income (she explains that over 90% of the city taxes are paid for by the federal government) immigrant families hailing from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and majority Spanish-speaking, but the teachers throughout her life that recognized her disadvantages and sought to highlight them rather than exploit them were the ones that aided her the most in her journey to college. Having teachers that could provide her with individualized help was an especially important part of Ashley’s literacy education because, unlike Molly, she had been diagnosed with a disability as a child: a speech impediment that made it especially difficult to learn how to articulate herself correctly.

At any rate, the assertion that teachers need to be in tune with the lives of their underrepresented and students can be made from the cases of Molly and Ashley. Whether Molly had been diagnosed with a mental illness during the time she struggled academically or whether Ashley did not have a speech impediment would have no influence on the demand for a teacher-
student relationship receptive to push-pull factors within a student’s life, particularly for those that are marginalized, that the NLS inquires for. There should be a sense of urgency to figure out the best way to support students’ identities starting from the classroom; in fact, Molly speaks about the instances where she witnessed how students were impacted by a lack of consideration and patience on the teachers’ parts:

“Because a lot of kids had so much going on at home and their education only went as far as going to school during the day, they didn’t really focus at school... they got left behind.”

In this instance, Molly makes a larger observation about the students she saw in similar situations to her own at school. For marginalized students, going to school is an additional pressure to potential familial, financial, and social challenges that may be occurring within their lives outside of it. Acknowledging these factors may not be directly related to literacy education; however, it undoubtedly has an impact on the abilities for these students to acquire literacy for social mobility if they are getting “left behind” as a result. Thus, before the NLS can be completely integrated into literacy education, literacy educators “…must look at reading and writing as activities having consequences in (and being affected by) family life, work patterns, economic conditions, patterns of leisure, and a complex of other factors” (Szwed 1981, p. 428).

Moreover, Ashley shared experiences between her peers and the way they were taught in their predominantly Spanish-speaking homes and the misunderstandings they had with teachers about this factor also necessitates a closer look at these tenuous teacher-student relationships:
“Teachers would always tell us ‘Oh, that sentence sounds weird’ or ‘That’s bad grammar,’ and we’re like ‘Well it sounds normal to us, because that’s how our new-English learning parents would talk to us.’”

These interactions with teachers, Ashley reveals, were quite common among the students in the schools she attended. Rather than taking their backgrounds into consideration (i.e. a student like Ashley who hails a Spanish-speaking household where everyone, including the parents, are trying to learn English), teachers would discourage them from writing in the ways they grew up writing in. Some would even go as far as to tell them to stop speaking Spanish completely in their classrooms to ensure that they were only learning English. If students cannot be made to feel like their identities, no matter how underrepresented or marginalized, are being acknowledged by the teacher and more importantly, their way of teaching, they are being deprived of opportunities to be successful in their education. We must come to terms with the lives of people without patronizing them or falling into what can become another oppressive force denying them from opportunities (Szwed 1981, p. 427).

However, as mentioned previously, not every participant interviewed came from the same communities and learned in those same communities. Participants that went to school within their marginalized communities that found that they had a more difficult time acquiring literacy or finding opportunities to do so than participants that went to more affluent schools.

In-Community Schooling:

Participants that disclosed going to schools within their communities for most or all their lives had significantly different experiences than their counterparts that went to school elsewhere. It is important to note that every participant interviewed had also reported living in
communities that were economically disadvantaged: school districts in neighborhoods where the average income is lower are taxed less, impacting the funding of for public resources such as community centers, playgrounds, and schools. Accordingly, the participants that attended schools in their communities – Ashley, Carmen, and Veronica – verbalized some of the ways that their peers and themselves were impacted by the school’s financial struggles.

One of the commonalities between Ashley, Carmen, and Veronica all was the issue of “...never really having enough to go around” in their schools. Having to share textbooks with classmates or read textbooks that were unkempt and ripping or simply outdated became the norm at the school they attended. Electronic resources, like computers were also often in poor condition and unable to be used to their fullest extent as a result. Ashley voiced to us her concerns about the high teacher turnover rates at her school, explaining that they were usually “...overworked and underpaid...” and had to work with the aid of little educational resources. These accounts made evident the financial challenges that these schools, often public (with the exception of Carmen who attended a private Catholic high school) and underfunded, had to work through in order to provide any sort of education to their students like Ashley, Carmen, and Veronica.

Yet, the question of how these students’ literacy attainment could have been stunted or delayed as a result of their underfunded neighborhood schools also remains. Being unable to use textbooks that were their own, in good condition and up-to-date meant that they were being deprived of acquiring or enhancing their literate abilities. In the same way, being unable to use computers in the best condition, or rely on teachers because of the cycle of open positions that persisted as a result of the turnover rates was another opportunity for literacy engagement missed out on by these students. It is precisely why the NLS studies is so critical for measuring the
extent to which students like Ashley, Carmen, and Veronica were essentially denied opportunities at acquiring literacy as a result of their marginalized identities. In other words, the rabbit hole runs deep: the families, communities, and schools within their communities all have played a role in impacting their literate abilities. To put them against their counterparts that have grown up in affluent families, communities, and schools as an assessment of their literacy skills would be a disservice to them and the literate abilities they have managed to acquire despite their circumstances. For this reason, we cannot insist on a way of literacy learning that is familiar to the middle-class mainstream (Green and Kostogriz 2003, p. 110) for students like Ashley, Carmen, and Veronica because they have simply been unable to learn in such a way. The NLS aims for literacy educators to be privy of these “non-traditional” students – it has never been more urgent than now to begin integrating it into literacy education.

Out-of-Community Schooling:

Molly and Irene were the only participants that stated that they attended schools outside of their neighborhoods. Usually, the separate neighborhoods that their schools were located in were more affluent and the student population reflected this. They were also predominantly white and rich both in terms of average student-family income and resources provided for the student body. Molly and Irene were equally aware of the privilege they held being able to attend these schools as opposed to their local community schools where drop-out rates were higher, and education was promoted less frequently. They lived two lives: going to school in more privileged communities but having to go back to the reality of their significantly less privileged at the end of the school day. Below Irene describes some of the paradoxes that came about from living this double life in her high school years:
“...the area that I live in now, everyone doesn’t end up... half of them drop out of high-school, a lot of them drop out of college, but I didn’t go to school in that district... I went to a private high school so that definitively made a difference in terms of the promotion for education. The whole time my school prided itself for having a very high graduation rate of students who pass on to go to a four-year university.”

Her explanation of these circumstances came about as a result of her struggling to answer the fifth question asked: Do you ever feel like education was promoted in the place you grew up in? She found that she would be unable to answer this question without mentioning the two opposing places where she found education was promoted less (in her hometown) and promoted more (in her high school outside of it). As literacy educators and scholars, considering the paradoxical influences that may be present in a student’s life – the push and pull factors that may be leading them away and towards literacy all at once – is necessary, especially when a student is hailing from an arguably “less literate” community.

Even at the more affluent schools she attended, Molly stated that teachers “...would select the students that they see aspiring the most and tell them to go there [good schools] instead of keeping that as a common goal for everyone,” particularly for the students that were of a similar background to her own, but were not as academically successful. What should the parameters be for deeming a student as more “academically aspiring” than others when they come from communities that are burdened with lower socioeconomic statuses, resources, and student success rates as a result? Could integration of the NLS into schools that are affluent or less so benefit the marginalized students like Molly and Irene that attend both? Answers to these questions can only come from beginning the process of integration of the NLS and documenting the progress through concrete research.
Implications and Limitations of Research

Although it can be argued that my research has been heavily theoretical and not a comprehensive example of what NLS integration looks like (as has been the standard for NLS research for more than a decade), I would argue that I have merely done research in response to existing scholarship. The purpose of my research aimed to not only establish a “call-to-action” for literacy education to incorporate the ideologies of NLS en masse, but to be a model of the type of research that can be published once it has been done. Contemporary research dedicated to the NLS should no longer be based in theory as it can have larger implications for how to respond to the proposed “literacy crisis” that literacy educators claim that our society is currently facing.

I have provided examples through my own research but have also been limited by other factors as well. One of these constraints, as mentioned previously, stems from there simply being not enough similar research published that is concrete and not solely foundational. Additionally, the participants chosen for this study were not all completely representative of the marginalized identities that I wanted to discuss and as a result, I could not make any arguments that were too specific in application.

Yet, the participants chosen for this study offered valuable insights and supplementary cause to some for suggesting how literacy education rooted in the NLS can look like in the future. Irene, for instance, spoke about sharing the knowledge and working as an afterschool tutor in her community to help the students there. Ashley suggested having individualized help for marginalized students or creating programs that are mindful of the time commitments of working-class families. Molly credited a large portion of her early academic success to her
attendance of free academic camps. These are all places where NLS education can be fit in some way.

The time is now to begin highlighting and acknowledging the identities of marginalized students rather than putting them against unrealistic standards of literacy. The NLS should no longer be just a theory for future literacy education – it should be the future of literacy education and the goal of literacy educators to incorporate broadly. I encourage scholars and enthusiasts within the literacy studies discourse to push for the same agendas I have in this paper by conducting research that attempts to understand the urgency for the NLS in literacy education and the instances where it can benefit students the most. Changing the standards to which we deem someone as satisfactorily literate by using the NLS as a guide could revolutionize literacy education for marginalized students and the educators that teach them for time to come.
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