Chapter 7
Prospective Teachers’ “Turn toward the Critical” in Unofficial Spaces

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ABSTRACT
This chapter discusses prospective teachers initiating and participating in a community-based after-school program for “at-risk” adolescents. Within this unofficial space, the author used this study to explore the potential for beginning teachers’ orientations to critical literacy to promote a commitment to teaching critically. This chapter also explored the ways that prospective teachers negotiate teacher identity. In contrast to an immediate socialization into “teacher as expert,” the work of prospective teachers in community-based sites facilitates a discussion of the appropriate role of teacher as well as the relationship between teacher/student and teaching/learning.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter investigates how beginning teachers viewed students’ out-of-school literacy practices, and how these teachers, as future educators, oriented themselves to conceptualizing literacy in a critical fashion. Out-of-school literacy practices, particularly when labeled as “nonmainstream,” entail an awareness and critique of societal power structures (Mahiri, 2004) that are not necessarily endorsed within the school context. Scholars who have argued for literacy as a tool for social action (Cintron, 1991; Mahiri, 1998) have also embraced a Freirian concept of action and reflection (Freire, 1970) and have urged youth to use their literacy—no matter how nonmainstream—as a tool for social action. In this chapter, I explore the different ways that beginning teachers can understand youth literacy practices at sites that can encourage future teachers to view literacy not as a decontextualized skill set but as a tool for social action. I also investigate how prospective teachers’ turn toward the critical engaged assumptions about “what counted” as valid literacy practices of students with whom they worked and how these literacy practices might contributed to students’ in-school learning.

Specifically, the chapter responds to the following questions with regard to how beginning teachers move toward understanding literacy through a critical lens:
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- What do prospective teachers’ responses to working with at-risk youth reveal about their orientation to literacy as practiced in unofficial spaces?
- How do prospective teachers imagine the intersection of “in-school” and “out-of-school” spaces with regard to the teaching and learning of literacy? How do they embrace teaching literacy through a critical orientation?

BACKGROUND

The goals of this chapter include understanding that teachers’ choices matter in promoting a view of literacy as a tool for social action. Particularly important with regard to the literacy practices of at-risk students, this chapter depicts how two beginning teachers move through a process of viewing literacy as something taught only in school to something enacted by adolescents in daily life. The chapter highlights how these beginning teachers move toward recruiting students’ out-of-school literacies for literacy learning through embracing a concept of literacy as multiple. A multiliteracies framework endorses the view that individuals’ use of their native language, discourse, and identity are, indeed, the keys to promoting social action (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Portraits of beginning teachers’ work with students illustrate how teachers must embrace a process of learning to successfully guide students toward recognizing how their authentic voice and identity can produce counternarratives to the way these students are portrayed by dominant societal discourses.

Community-based settings, such as the Family Partnership program (all names of people and places in the chapter are pseudonyms) for homeless families, the site of the study on which this chapter is based, offer potential sites for beginning teachers’ growth. Such sites allow prospective teachers to consider how schools reside in the context of a community, and this awareness can broaden beginning teachers’ understandings of where learning takes place (Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006). This chapter specifically draws on the work of two beginning teachers who were, at the time of the study, prospective English language arts teachers at Green State University. These two teachers were part of a larger cohort of 10 prospective teachers who worked with homeless youth in an after-school tutoring and mentoring program in the community for the course of one semester. Though there were 10 teachers involved in the study, these two teachers’ cases exist as “telling cases” (Ellen, 1984), because both expressed a teaching philosophy and commitment to working with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds and they exemplified practices where these commitments became visible.

The program in which the teachers worked, Family Partnership, is part of a national organization designed to address the needs of homeless families and has been implemented nationwide. The program was adopted in Cedar Creek, the community in which this study was situated, in November of 2008. As prospective teachers undertook after-school tutoring work with youth at Family Partnership, I, as a teacher educator, became interested in understanding the triumphs and challenges that this experience yielded for them, and how it furthered their conceptions of youths’ literacy and learning.

Critical Literacy and the In-School/Out-of-School Divide

The field of literacy studies has undergone great shifts in the past decades (Alvermann & McLean, 2007; Gee, 2000). Responding to these shifts has led scholars in the field in new directions, and one such direction has been the movement away from a conception of a singular, “school-based” literacy to a recognition of literacy as multiple (New London Group, 1996), suggesting that “modes of representation [are] much broader than language alone…[and that they are situated
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