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“Are You Still Helping That Community?”: Reflections on “Community” in Literacy Research and Practice

by Marcelle M. Haddix

Natasha: *You go for a couple hours once a week and then you bounce back to your prissy little life—*

Latoya: —and that’s what I’m sayin. That’s when I was like, *‘you know, I’m very happy that you do all these things...I’m glad, I’m glad for you. I’m glad that you feel like you’re doing a lot for the community’...*

Natasha: *And when you leave [here], are you gonna continue to do any of these things? Or are you gonna go back into your little bubble?*

Latoya: And that’s the other thing the class is about...once you go on these little service trips, what’s the aftermath of it? What happens afterwards, *are you still helping “that community”?*

In this exchange, Natasha and Latoya, both teacher candidates completing their student teaching at the time, lamented the way that community engagement and service learning were taken up in their teacher education program that catered to a majority White female student population. As two Black women, they shared with me, a Black woman teacher educator, how community service was defined in ways that negated their relationship to the community and the reasons for wanting to work with and in community. Elsewhere, I have written about the importance of listening to teachers of color in our efforts toward preparing community engaged teachers (Haddix, 2015). But, as I reflect again on this exchange between Natasha and Latoya, I also pause at Latoya’s emphasis on the phrase “that community.” Each time she says community, she highlights the ways that individuals, in this case her White peers, position themselves in relation to communities of marginalized peoples. More pointedly, they both describe a community service ideology where majority White students go into communities with



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a savior complex to help poor people of color. This stance was one they often witnessed from peers and professors within their teacher education program.

I begin with this exchange because their frustration and skepticism mirror what I feel when I consider how community literacy is often defined and taken up in literacy research and teaching. Who defines community? What is the meaning of community literacy? How do literacy scholars and teachers understand their role and position in relation to the people from “that community”? These questions have been central in my own thinking about my desire and commitment to do community-engaged work. In this column, I unpack ideas of community and community literacy through a reflection on what informs my connection to community literacy, specifically my work within my local community and the *Writing Our Lives* collaborative. I fully acknowledge that my own evolving understanding of community and community literacy is deeply rooted in my personal and family history and a legacy of community involvement to my situatedness within the Syracuse community, especially as a parent of a school age Black boy. I am constantly questioning what I—a mother, a community member, and a teacher and teacher educator—can do to help change what is going on in my community, in my local schools, and in the lives of young people.

Whose Community?

When I grew up and attended schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, our teachers and school leaders lived in our neighborhoods and were important members of the community. I know the value of having members of my school community who claimed strong identification and affiliation with my home community and the positive impact that our shared communities had on my life. I learned from the examples set by my mother and grandmother, both child care educators and activists, about the significance of leveraging community knowledge and cultural practices in order to create optimal teaching and learning experiences and outcomes for its youth. In fact, I decided that I wanted to become a teacher so that I could give back to my community, often a reason I hear articulated by teacher candidates of color about why they pursue teaching. As Camille, a Black woman preservice teacher, shared with me, she viewed teaching as a way of "giving back to the kids that look like me and speak like me" (Haddix, 2016). For teacher candidates of color, teaching is a way to connect back with one's community as opposed to distancing one's self from the community.

This sentiment stands in contrast to the messages I sometimes hear from teachers who emphasize that they live outside of the school community and that their mission is to help students in a community that differs from their own. For this reason, I offer here that it is necessary to unpack what we mean by community in discussions of community literacy. Philip, Way, Garcia, Schuler-Brown, & Navarro (2013) point out that "within the field of education, 'community' is a frequently used construct to understand the unique experiences, strengths, and needs of students of color" (p. 175). In doing literacy work with and within communities, it is critical to have an understanding of their historical, political, and social roots. Anyone wanting to do work within a community should first understand what is happening there and why. In terms of community literacy, it is critical to understand how identities are constructed through language and literacy practices within the community and what power dynamics are at play.

When moving outside of her work in secondary classrooms into youth-led literacy spaces, Moje (2000) examined her own understanding and positioning of "community" in community-based literacy research by asking "what does it mean to study community? When I follow a group of adolescents out of a content-area classroom and into their 'community,' where am I going? Am I entering a confined geographical space? A psychological space? A cultural space? Whose community is studied? By whom? And more important, *why* am I studying the community?" (p. 78). I implore this kind of critical reflection any time individuals express a desire to work within a community, especially one that they position as different from their own. In order to disrupt the framing of community engagement through a "missionary" or "White savior" lens, it is paramount to ask how this community-engaged work is shaped by and shaping the identities of those involved. I actually question whether an individual can do transformative work within a community where they position themselves or are positioned as an outsider. I am reminded of the words used by Lilla Watson, an indigenous Aboriginal elder, activist, and educator in Australia, who said, "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" (<http://invisiblechildren.com/blog/2012/04/04/the-origin-of-our-liberty-is-bound-together/>). We need a community literacy that acknowledges our differences, yet requires shared and interconnected purposes.

Defining Community Literacy

When I moved to Syracuse almost a decade ago, one of my main priorities was to insure that my son transitioned well to his new school environment. We were becoming members of a new community, one that I needed to learn about its historical, political, and cultural roots. To do so, I began attending local events to meet other families and parents and to listen to and learn from community members about what was going on and what were central issues and concerns. At one meeting focused on the state of education for Black children, I listened to parents share their personal accounts of how the schools were failing their children.

I decided that, as a parent of a school age child too, I needed to find ways to leverage my skills and expertise as a literacy scholar and English educator to right the educational wrongs done to children who community members declared, “can’t read or write! They don’t know their own history.” The community was angered by an educational system that was not meeting their expectations or the academic or social needs of their children. Even more damaging was that the community’s understanding of its youth’s literacy practices were overshadowed by district test score results and other standardized measures.

Such deficit framings of achievement risk defining community literacy as a space relegated to reversing the learning outcomes for *struggling writers and readers*. So, while these writers and readers may not flourish in a school or academic setting, community literacy efforts can encourage their intellectual growth and engagement. This definition of community literacy is misguided in that it negates the legitimate knowledges and forms of achievement that are of the community, and it situates community literacy as an intervention with a sole purpose of filling an achievement gap that positions mostly Black and Brown children against their White peers. In short, beginning any community literacy effort by naming its participants as “struggling” or “failing” is problematic. Instead, community literacy should draw on the multiple and often unheard voices and perspectives within the community to enact social change (Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995). Instead of merely working on behalf of the community, it bridges diverse perspectives for the purpose of reaching shared goals. Community literacy demands an acknowledgment of community members as agentive and creative knowers, doers, thinkers, and producers.

In my efforts to support community literacy, I began offering writing workshops at a local library throughout the week, and young people arrived each day ready to write, ready to talk about their writing, and ready to share their writing. Though school-sanctioned standards constructed these youths as non-readers and writers, this community space—the library—allowed for the re-seeing and re-knowing (Vasudevan, 2006) of

the literacies of these young people. Listening to and learning from the youth who attended the workshops, I expanded the program beyond the library to cultivate the spaces that encouraged and supported the literacy needs and interests of youth that extended past school walls—the spaces in libraries, in community centers, in churches, and even in the “other spaces” (Wissman, 2011) inside schools. I created *Writing Our Lives*, a youth writing collaborative initiative for youth grades 6-12 in the greater Syracuse area, to celebrate youth literacies and to make visible the kinds of spaces that support their literacy interests and needs. A main goal of *Writing Our Lives* is to serve as an invitation for youth writers to share their stories with each other and as a space that values the legitimacy and significance of their stories socially, politically, and historically. This happens during an annual youth writing conference, afterschool programs, and summer institutes.

As 21st century youth writers, young people are writing and rewriting their lives and histories via multiple forms of composing, including the use of digital technologies and social media like vlogging/blogging, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as well as other forms such as spoken word poetry, documentary and film, and oral storytelling. These are youth literacy spaces that encourage and foster the civically and publicly engaged writing practices of today’s youth writers, drawing on and informed by notions of family literacies (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012), out-of-school literacies (Hull & Shultz, 2002), adolescent literacies (Hinchman & Appleman, 2016) and empowering youth-centered literacies (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012). I did not enter this community literacy work to help struggling readers and writers; *Writing Our Lives* allows me and other educators and community members to bear witness to the often civically and socially engaged literacies of youth writers and to learn from their creative forms of expression. My hope remains that we glean from these kinds of community literacy practices ways to transform teaching and learning within schools so they become spaces where young people are telling their stories within a world that can deny their credibility, their intelligence, and their ability to know and to write.

Are You Still Helping That Community?

I want to end by coming back to the initial questions, who defines community? What is the meaning of community literacy? How do literacy scholars and teachers understand their role and position in relation to the people from "that community"? Engaging in community literacy work must begin with a critical and thoughtful examination of one's own identities and relationship to "that community" by addressing any assumptions held about the people, history, and culture within the community and by asking what one brings to and takes from the community. In my mind, community literacy must uphold reciprocal relationships and emphasize what we as literacy teachers and scholars learn from working with and within communities and by bringing community knowledges and cultural practices into our schools and classrooms. Too often, community literacy is reduced to one-time service learning trips or projects that somehow make communities better or fix problems oftentimes named by people from outside the community; people go in, do a project or an intervention, and leave.

In my work with and in my community, I am deeply concerned with and impacted by the experiences of our young people both in and beyond school contexts, including in my role as a parent. I intentionally move away from an understanding of community literacy as singular and finite toward the idea of community "literacies" to signal my desire to be a part of the ongoing work of communities to address social issues—my work does not end with the annual writing conference or with one writing workshop. Instead, community literacy work should develop collaborative partnerships that listen to and honor the "funds of knowledge" of the community members and that stem from a shared investment in liberation for the community. Latoya's question, "Are you still helping that community?", demands a critical interrogation of our imperative for doing this work in the first place. Only then can we truly work toward empowering and transformative realities for youth and their communities.

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Marcelle M. Haddix works in the arts department in the Syracuse University School of Education. She directs two literacy programs for adolescent youth: the *Writing Our Lives* project, a program geared toward supporting the writing practices of urban middle and high school students within and beyond school contexts, and the *Dark Girls* afterschool program for Black middle school girls aimed at celebrating Black girl literacies. She is the vice president of the Literacy Research Association.
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