

CHAPTER 4

Contexts for Adolescent Literacy

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This chapter focuses on school contexts for literacy. Adolescents need a safe and stimulating environment to explore ideas and take risks with literacy, so the environments of middle and high schools are critically important. During adolescence, schools can help students find their voices and learn the skills they need to hone their ideas and reasoning abilities as well as to further develop their self-images and tastes. This chapter describes “literate thinking” and why this conception can develop visions of successful school contexts for adolescent literacy beyond simply focusing on acts of reading and writing. At school, it requires educators to look to the classroom, program, school, and school–community relations—all contexts that deeply affect learning. Calling on studies of adolescent literacy based on a sociocognitive view, the chapter focuses on aspects of school environments where students do better than in other schools with similar students. Several findings relate to the overall school environment, showing how positive schools provide layers of supportive contexts, such as *Personal Contexts*, in which individual and shared identities are displayed; *Networking Contexts*, in which each participant is supported in relation to each other participant; *Management Contexts*, in which the power of running the school is shared; and *School Support Contexts* that keep students from getting lost. Several other findings relate specifically to the teaching and learning environment in a school, including *Professional Contexts*, in which adults in a building keep up with knowledge in their fields; *Programmatic Contexts*, which include the teams, departments, grade levels, groups, and other committees working on the curricular program; and *Classroom Contexts* that are both learning communities as well as social ones. Improving adolescent literacy demands a consideration of the contextual features described as more focused vectors for examination and direction.

Despite the array of research on adolescent literacy evident in this *Handbook*, there has often been a greater focus on what to teach than on the contexts and approaches that might be age appropriate. This chapter cuts a broad swath, culling information from a range of related areas, to guide educators in conceptualizing and creating the most effective environments in the support of adolescent literacy.

Adolescence is an era of tremendous personal and cognitive growth with some similarities to, but also differences from, the years before and after. New skills and strategies are needed to do well as the school years progress and student needs, interests, and abilities shift. As Luke and Elkins (1998) and Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) point out, adolescent literacy is about complex social relationships between adolescents and

their rich symbolic and discursive lives. Adolescents want the security of known people and routines in their lives, even as they are reaching out to the unknown world for new role models and ideas they can try on as they explore the possible selves they might become. In their search, they look to the people they meet both indirectly and directly (e.g., movies, media, books, observations, discussions) for inspiration—however transitory or influential these might be. Some adolescents encounter identity conflicts associated with academic achievement and class, culture, or gender boundaries, complicated by their understanding of what is significant and what it takes to be competent (Davidson, 1996; Everhart, 1983; Fine, 1989; Gilyard, 1991; Miron & Lauria, 1998; Rose, 1990; Sarris, 1993). To travel this winding course of growing up, adolescents need both a personally safe and a cognitively stimulating environment where they can explore ideas and take risks. This is why middle and high schools play such a critically important role in life development. Middle and high schools can help them become thinkers and learners who are reasoned and self-aware, as well as competent. By acting as “safe houses” (Pratt, 1991) where students can feel they are accepted as they are and where they can be shielded from the personal and social tensions they may experience in their various communities outside, schools can be supportive contexts where adolescents have the trust to explore and find themselves and their possible places in the world.

Despite the fact that some students are learning quite well and others are “beating the odds” (Langer, 2001a), the overall literacy record based on test results in United States schools raises questions. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2006) reports that approximately 1.2 million high school students fail to graduate each year and that only 70% of students who enter eighth grade actually graduate from high school. In the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, 26% of eighth graders and 28% of twelfth graders who took the exam scored in the lowest category (“below basic”), and only 2% of eighth graders and 4% of twelfth graders scored in the highest category (“advanced”). Further, only 31% of the eighth-grade and 34% of

the twelfth-grade students tested scored “at or above proficient.”

NAEP writing results are similar. In the 2002 assessment of writing, 16% of eighth graders and 27% of twelfth graders scored “below basic,” and only 2% of both eighth and twelfth graders scored at the “advanced” level. Thirty percent of eighth graders and 22% of twelfth graders scored “at or above proficient.”

Although a fuller picture using more than one indicator of students’ literacy abilities is critical for decision making, the NAEP results point to a real and pervasive problem, one that, despite small ups and downs, has remained relatively persistent since NAEP was authorized by Congress in 1969 to take the pulse of students’ school development. What does this mean for the field of adolescent literacy, and what can we do?

It is easy to take aim at the tests (see, e.g., Fair Test, n.d.), charging that they are culturally biased, tap only a subset of the academic knowledge and skills students learn and perform at school, and leave no room for the multiliteracy tools that students communicate with and gain meaning from outside school (Hull & Zacher, 2004; Langer, 1985, 1987b); Marshall (Chapter 8) and Intrator & Kunzman (Chapter 3), this volume; Moje et al., 2004; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Oakes, 1985; Wraga, 1999). However, it is also easy to feel that even given these failings of standardized assessments, a consistent message from the test results points to a need for improvement—in the ways in which curriculum and instruction are conceived and taught and in how they are tested (Darling-Hammond, 1991, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Aneess, & Falk, 1995; Garcia, 1991; Langer, 2004; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; Spillane & Jennings, 1997; Wilson, Peterson, Ball, & Cohen, 1996).

LITERATE THINKING

From my perspective, substantive changes in instruction and assessment will not occur without substantive changes in our notions of literacy. Because literacy is generally taken to connote only reading and writing, I have found it more useful to focus on what I

call “literate thinking” (Langer 1987a, 2005a, 2005b). This concept extends beyond the acts of reading and writing themselves to also include what the mind thinks about and does when people gain knowledge, reason with it, and communicate about it in a variety of contexts. There are some common abilities that are called upon when we read, write, think, and speak—when we use the various signs, languages, and dialects that bring and convey meaning (Danesi, 1994; Kress et al., 2005; Morris, 1971; Sebeok, 1977; Sebeok & Danesi, 2000; Peirce, 1992). From this perspective, literacy can be thought of as the ability to think like a literate person, to call upon the kinds of reasoning abilities people generally use when they read and write (such as the ability to reflect on text and its meanings) even when reading and writing are not involved, such as watching a TV program or sports event (Langer, 1985, 1987a). It involves the use of signs, the ability to gain meaning from them, and the ability to understand and control them. Sign systems such as films, music, dance, websites, multimodal constructions and performances (see Alvermann, Chapter 2, and Black & Steinkuehler, Chapter 18, this volume) pervade our society. But the text, whatever its presentational form, must be meaningful to be a sign, and it is the environment in which the sign lives that gives it meaning (Bakhtin, 1986). Reading and writing are also systems of signs, and although strategies involved in meaning-building and meaning-communicating across this wide array of signs are different, there also are similarities across them all, which are at the heart of literate thinking.

For example, if you listen to people leaving a movie theater, often you hear them talking not merely about what they liked or disliked but about things that surprised them and why; some give examples, and others disagree and give counterexamples. They engage in literate thinking. Such literate acts also take place when people search the Web for information about a purchase they would like to make, or write a report using photos, graphics, other visual objects, and sound as the format for a multimodal research report.

I believe this conception of literate thinking can take us much farther in developing new visions of successful school contexts for

adolescent literacy than simply focusing on acts of reading and writing. Flood, Lapp, Heath, and Langer (in press), for example, discuss ways in which media and the range of communicative arts such as film, music, images, dance, websites, multimodal constructions, and performance involve literacy-related behaviors that are central to success in today’s society (see also Alvermann, Chapter 2, and Zoss, Chapter 13, this volume; and Black & Steinkuehler, Chapter 18, this volume). Literate thinking assumes individual, cultural, and group differences and leaves room for teachers to invite students to use what they understand and have experienced as a starting place for learning. It expects differing perspectives and gives students a place to try ideas out, to manipulate what they think, and to use language in ways that help them refine and rethink. It moves students to become analytic about the content at hand as they gain skills and knowledge to relate to new content and learning. Thus, literate thinking is literacy with a bigger-than-traditional context.

I have been studying various aspects of adolescent literacy learning and instruction for the past 30 years and at this time am particularly interested in the kinds of school contexts that are supportive of adolescent literacy growth. This is because I believe literacy is essentially a social enterprise in which social behaviors move cognition and affect both what and how things get learned (Langer, 1987a, 2005b; see also Bloome, 1986; Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1999; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Literacy grows from the social environments in which participants are regularly a part, including school. Each adolescent is a complex individual who belongs to a number of cultures that may be identified by any number of qualities, such as shared beliefs and dress, as well as ways of communicating and behaving. The home can be considered one such culture, the neighborhood another. The place of worship, groups of friends, and school are potential others. Some of these cultures may overlap, and adolescents often try out new ones and leave some older ones. What counts as *smart* and *doing well* often differs from group to group. An extended notion of literacy needs to take these multiple cultures into account, and literacy education needs to leave room for individuals’ experiences to be used

in the course of gaining academic literacies (Langer, 1995).

School life involves tensions and conflicts between individual and group experience. Adolescents spend a great amount of time at school, and schools are not neutral contexts. Peterson (2002) developed labels of “positive” versus “toxic” to describe school cultures, because schools differ in the degree to which they emanate messages that make adolescents feel welcome as school members, or function as Pratt’s (1991) safe havens. The task before us, as I see it, is to envision the kinds of secondary schools where most students want to attend, like to participate, and learn well. This task requires us to look not only at, but also beyond, instruction—to the classroom, program, school, and school/community relations—all contexts that deeply affect learning.

SCHOOLS THAT WORK WELL

What are school environments like in places where students do better than in other schools with similar students? What can we learn about school contexts that make a difference in student literacy? The rest of this chapter explores possible answers to these questions and calls on a number of recent studies in which I have been engaged at the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA).

In my 5-year Beating the Odds research project (see Langer, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2004, 2005b), I studied professional, programmatic, classroom, and neighborhood communities and their roles in the educational picture of 25 schools, 44 teachers, 88 classes, and more than 2,000 students in four states. Because I was interested in understanding features of “schools that worked,” I paired schools with comparable demographics, one higher and one lower performing, based on their reputations as well as their high-stakes test scores (see Langer, 2002, for more details). Each teacher, school, and situation was studied for 2 years each, so my research team and I had ample time to examine how patterns within these communities played themselves out and affected students over time. We visited the schools for 5 weeks each year, seeing students arrive at school and leave, observing classes and

meetings of all sorts, and spending time in each community.

From these studies, we learned that middle and high schools where students do better on high-stakes tests, as well as in their course work, than those in other schools with similar demographics, have significantly different school cultures than their counterparts. Because schools were compared only to schools with similar characteristics, it was possible to identify, for example, the more effective versus the more typical schools with high percentages of students in poverty or from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds, as well as the more effective and more typical suburban, middle-class schools. Overall, however, there were some substantial features that were common to all the more effective schools regardless of demographics, and it was these that differentiated them from the schools that were more typical. For the rest of this chapter, the terms *more effective* and *more typical* are used to describe various contextual features found in the well-regarded and higher-performing schools and those schools that performed more like others of their type. Examples are drawn from my Beating the Odds and Effective Literacy Instruction studies to provide a coherent overview of the various contexts that shape effective adolescent literacy instruction.

First, the social as well as instructional messages students receive from the moment they step onto school property are undeniably different in the two types of schools. The more effective schools are the more inviting ones, day after day after day. In addition to being educational centers, they are caring community centers, communities where everyone involved (teachers, administrators, secretaries, related teaching staff, cleaners and drivers, other helpers, and students as well as parents) are members. And, as is usual in caring communities (Noddings, 1984; Langer, 2000), everyone is recognized, acknowledged, and in some sense, watched over—both educationally and personally. People work together, and everyone counts; from the moment you enter the school, there is a palpable sense of caring. The school motto, stated or not, is that everyone *can* learn and that it is the joint responsibility of community members to see that everyone *does*.

Successful teaching and learning take place within caring communities. Administrators go the extra mile by showing kindness to teachers in a host of large and small ways, and teachers do the same for students. The professionals stop problems before they start and also serve as role models. For example, in one more effective middle school in a poor community with a large Spanish-speaking population, a teacher who was himself a native speaker of Spanish said, “Kids need to be comfortable. They need to see me as a resource, and I hope that’s what’s happening—not only that they see me as an authoritative figure, that they see me as a mentor, as a role model. When I walk out in the hall they can say, ‘Well, . . . he’s my teacher. He’s what I would like to be when I grow up’ ” (see Langer, 2002, for more examples).

In more effective schools a sense of caring pervades both the school culture and the teaching and learning culture. Let us look at each separately, first the school culture and then the teaching and learning culture, to understand the various contexts within each culture that contribute to their success in more effective schools.

SCHOOL CULTURE

Personal Context

More effective schools are humane, they have a social present and past history, and show it. Although all schools have what Kress and his colleagues (2005) call a semiotic sense, a meaning-laden way of presenting themselves, their messages can vary widely. In a semiotic sense, the school building makes a personal statement that can be more or less welcoming, however unintended this may be. The building and the physical images of the people inside are outward signs of a school’s attitude toward students, education, and learning, as well as its relationship to the world outside school. More effective schools send an undeniable message of welcome. We can see a welcome in the entrance doors holding messages of greeting, in the walls adorned with photographs and student work, and in people’s welcoming body language. As you enter a school, the sights and sounds, as well as the faces, bodies, and voices, tell you whether the school is a welcoming place for its parents, teachers,

community members, and students. A glance at the walls and display cases can introduce you to the members of the community—who and what it is interested in, who and what it values.

In the halls, public rooms, and classrooms of the more effective schools, you may see photos of past classes, present school and class activities, announcements of school events, related school and community news and reminders, student work, and lots of student art and photos. In more effective schools, students can see themselves as well as their friends, relatives and neighbors everywhere. They know they belong. The teachers and other faculty and staff members, whose faces and work are evident, also know they belong.

Each day when students arrive, the principal and other school staff meet them at the door, welcoming them with a smile and words of greeting. Their teachers meet them at the open classroom doors to greet them and exchange words of welcome. They often comment or inquire about family, friends, or outside interests. Teachers and students ask each other how they are doing and make small talk. They show an interest in one another. When parents and visitors arrive, there are signs of greeting on the walls and useful directions pointing newcomers to the school office or other destinations. When doors are not or cannot be open, someone is waiting inside to greet visitors with a smile and available help—whatever the community. The feeling is one of welcome. The classroom doors are also generally open, and when a door is not or cannot be open, there is a glass window in the door that invites one to peek inside and see the activity. Visits are welcome. Facial expressions are open. As a result of this home-school connection, adolescents find school a safe place, a bridge between their known and unknown worlds. It becomes a place where they can try out whatever new ideas, opinions, or self-presentations they are ready for. And someone caring is nearby to listen, help, or simply be there when needed.

Compare this with the closed feeling you get from some other schools, the less effective ones. At these schools, often no one meets students at the door; they find their way into the buildings and classrooms on their own (Langer, 2004, Ch. 7). Aides are

assigned to monitor the entrance and halls, primarily to stop unruly behavior and maintain decorum, not to greet. When students enter their classrooms, they sit and wait for the room to fill and the door to be closed. Kind words and questions of interest are rare. At best, it is *down to business*. At worst, the mood is adversarial, especially in the least effective schools. For adolescents, such schools often become alien territories rather than safe houses. Although individual wonderfully effective teachers may work in these schools, they are not the norm. Wonderful teachers can be a joy to remember, but they are the exceptions; more suffused and connected experiences across the years are needed to make a difference in student attitude and learning (Langer 2002, 2004). In less effective schools, students are rarely known as individuals or understood as people, and finding themselves within school walls becomes a difficult and sometimes uncomfortable venture, one far more distant and less supportive than in the more effective schools with students just like them.

Networking Contexts

More effective schools are organized around a wide range of networking contexts: school (administration and teachers) with parents and students; school (administration and teachers) with community; faculty with faculty; and faculty with administration and with students, to name some. Beyond the work tasks and necessary interactions within each network, each has a variety of subnetworks as well as viable links to the other networks. Each of these networks engages in communication and feedback, so no one is out of the loop. Reeves (2006) calls these nodes, hubs, and superhubs (see also Barabasi, 2003). The node is the individual, the hub is a node with connections to other hubs, and a superhub is a network to which numerous other nodes and hubs are connected. They foster communication and distribute knowledge across the participants, who can build bridges (Reeves, 2006). More effective schools can be identified by the existence of hubs and bridges. The communication system is not hierarchical but nonlinear and highly interactive, and as result of this structure, it affirms everyone's value as an integral part of the school community: its parents and teach-

ers (all its employees), community members, and its students.

Management Contexts

The personal inclusion felt in more effective schools as a result of hubs and bridges creates a school–community bond beyond the usual parent–teacher conferences, help on school trips, and fund-raising. Parents and community members are seen as resources in the students' education, and used as such. They are considered as having “funds of knowledge” (Moje et al., 2004; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Bringing local knowledge out of the community and into the school validates what parents as well as schools know, fosters ties to the community, and at the same time creates a sense of connectedness and affirmation for students. For example, teachers identify parents and community members with abilities, jobs, or hobbies that can be related to instruction or students' future plans, and the teachers invite them to share their expertise at school. In addition, members of the school community approach local businesses and industries for varying degrees of educational involvement.

One middle school in Florida invites parents who run small businesses to explain the math they use in their work and to help the students solve some of their work problems. In a New York school district, parents with computer expertise are brought in to interact with students and teachers about software, helping them gain both new knowledge and practice. A high school in Texas that is close to a small airport where many parents work has created an optional aviation magnet program for students of all abilities, where students can learn related skills and knowledge, from airport maintenance to aviation, within an academic environment that combines these with math, science, history, and literacy. Similarly, a high school in Florida has created a mathematics academy as well as a construction academy, both also within academic programs for college- or job-bound students. Here, students work with local stockbrokers, architects, and construction firms (some of whom are parents and most of whom are community members) as they learn beyond the basics of academic knowledge. To help them become

comfortable in a college environment, students at a combined middle and high school in Los Angeles take some of their regular classes at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), while they and their parents receive counseling about their present work, including expectations, work habits, study skills, and socialization. In all cases, home-school connections are recognized and strengthened, and students can develop interests and see opportunities for themselves. (For more information about these schools and more, at both middle and high school levels, see Langer, 2002.)

In the most effective schools (those that are higher performing and also have good reputations), parents, community members, and students also participate in school management. Even in the poorest communities where parents hold two jobs and students work after school, the schools reach out to include parents and students. Parents have room to serve on decision-making committees and to be involved in other ways to voice ideas and to be heard. The schools make time for them and make allowances for their schedules. There is a true interaction about shared problems and shared dreams. Disagreements are confronted and worked out before they escalate. Students, too, are on committees and have a voice, and their comments are taken seriously to inform decision making. One school district in New York, for example, has a long-standing, districtwide school-based management system, individual school building cabinets, and working groups of parents, community members, and students at each school. These committees have teeth; although administrators are committee members, they never serve as chair.

Thus, in more effective schools, there is room for students to be part of the community at the very time they may also be trying also to move beyond. They have emotional support and a sense of efficacy locally, and their participation in school management also helps them to hone management skills: planning, decision making, and anticipating consequences—all related to literate reasoning behaviors as well as life.

School Support Contexts

In the more effective schools, there is a substantial student support network to keep in-

dividual students from getting lost. Parents and community members are kept informed of school activities and of changes in school programs, offerings, and routines. Parents are involved in their children's course planning and are kept up-to-date about their progress, abilities, and difficulties. Although the door is always open for parents to discuss their child's school experiences, a support group of counseling services and parent education courses are also available with help for such parenting issues as anger, crisis, sobriety, and drug treatment and management. These schools believe students' nonacademic needs affect both attitude and academic performance, and they try to help students and their families with such concerns (Langer, 2004).

Beyond this, more effective schools are also proactive. At their weekly team meetings, teachers discuss not only their curriculum and teaching approaches, but also how their students are doing. A student whose behavior, attendance, or work habits seem to be changing is discussed by the group of teachers that student takes courses with. Students are identified early, in the hope that a potentially escalating problem can be averted. In one middle school in New York that is divided into smaller *houses* to ensure each student is known, the house principal, guidance counselor, and special education teacher meet weekly with each team of teachers. That way, everyone remains informed about student needs and work as the year progresses. Parents are called in for team meetings sooner rather than later, and together with the student, work on helpful next steps. Progress and well-being are monitored, and everyone, including the student, has a voice, from early on, in defining and addressing problems. The school offers group meetings and counseling services on such education-related topics as homework, test preparation, school expectations, and state requirements. The school opens courses to parents and students together, as well as to the community as a whole, including classes on many levels of computer and digital camera use, as well as on topics students and parents request—from growing flowers to losing weight to keeping a checkbook.

All these activities are about students and involve students. There is a pervasive sense of caring, community, and trust.

These permeate the environment and are merged into the semiotic sense of welcome and well-being that more effective schools convey. They create the safe houses for learning and growth that parents want and adolescents need. Yet less effective schools, in comparison to the higher-performing schools that are otherwise like them, offer none of this. They say parents are too busy and that students don't care or can't do better. They say they try their best but do not engage in the kinds of active support efforts their better-performing peer schools do. (For more about school culture, see Fullan, 1991; Langer, 2002, 2004; Lieberman, 1992; Little & McLaughlin 1993; Peterson, 2002.)

TEACHING AND LEARNING CULTURE

Just as students, their parents, and community members have personal experiences with more effective schools in ways that are so very comfortable and compelling, so too do teachers and administrators. The ways in which educators work together to understand student and school needs, grow professionally, fine-tune programs, and offer engaging and effective instruction bring into view another vector in the more effective school's semiotic presentation of self. We can "read" this aspect of a school by looking at its professional, programmatic, and classroom contexts.

Professional Context

As discussed earlier, the effective school building offers a semiotic message of welcome, and so too does it offer a message of professional competence and concern, whatever student community it serves. Teachers, administrators, and related staff members are deeply involved in keeping up with the knowledge in their fields, in program offerings as they relate to their students' learning, and in ways to make that learning happen well and happily. You can see this professional semiotic at work as you walk through the hallways. Educators are meeting in groups to discuss curriculum or something they have seen, heard, or read that is relevant to teaching and learning. In the faculty lounge,

you can hear discussions about lessons that went well, and those that didn't, what the teacher will do differently, and other ideas about lessons to come. You also see teachers reaching out to offer more and more engaging activities and discussing how to fine-tune them. You see them reflecting on the curriculum and changes they think need to be made. They share and help each other. They work together informally as well as formally.

More effective schools are marked by profoundly well-working professional communities. Teachers and administrators pool their knowledge, work together, and learn together to help them better understand their students' needs and to be responsive to the bigger picture of societal demands and changing times. They try to stay current with their fields, with their students, and with society. And they work collaboratively to leverage their knowledge for the benefit of the school. One way they do this is by meeting regularly to discuss the academic programs, what the teachers and administrators are doing, and how the students are doing. They never lose sight of who their students are and the special planning it takes for all students to do better. Thoughtful and enriched classroom experiences that engage their students in the ideas of the course work and help them gain new skills and knowledge is the goal. How to make it work for their students is their challenge. They believe all students can become more highly literate and that it is their professional responsibility to make it happen. Their students' successes are theirs, and their students' failures are theirs. They work as a team toward ongoing success—which to them is actualized when students like school and do well. They aim for both.

They know professional learning is at the core of a school's growth. Therefore, administrators and teachers encourage their colleagues to belong to professional groups, attend conferences, read professional literature, visit other schools, take workshops and courses, and also to give them. They are expected to be active members in their professional communities. They know that the richest professional knowledge is gained through participation in a combination of these activities. But they know too that school growth does not stop with the learn-

ing experiences of an individual professional. This knowledge needs to be shared, discussed, and debated in terms of their school and their students. For example, one school district in New York has a deep undercurrent of professional enthusiasm. It values professional involvement and encourages teachers and administrators to work and grow together. Administrators provide time for meetings and working groups, and individual schools plan schedules with these in mind. These administrators also spend money on invited consultants the staff members feel would be helpful (rather than deciding on staff development apart from teachers), and they encourage teachers to participate in professional organizations, take time off to visit other schools, attend workshops, or give workshop sessions themselves. They know the payoff comes when the teachers return and share their experiences so as to offer the larger faculty, through their informal as well as formal networks, a fresh look at themselves and at their own schools and students. All the more effective schools had similar professional qualities, whatever their demographics. (For more about professional contexts, see Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves, 2003; Langer, 2002, 2005b; Lieberman, 1992; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 1998.)

Programmatic Contexts

As part of their “hubs and bridges” organizational approach, more effective schools have a number of professional networks, all working simultaneously: instructional teams, academic departments, grade-level meetings, curriculum development groups, self-study committees, and other collaborative structures. Some of these groups work across grade levels and subject areas and some do not. Because teachers and administrators are members of more than one group, they cross lines; together they ensure a greater communication of ideas and directions. When they are not meeting face-to-face, they share articles, e-mails, and comments. In more effective schools, professional ideas are in the air all the time. When they work and share together, the educators in a school develop a common understanding over time—of what their students need and how best to help them learn. Over time, they also develop a

shared philosophy of education, with a related way of looking at their students and their needs, as well as at instructional goals and approaches that are appropriate for their students. They find their thought-through way of responding to changes in their fields, to societal demands, to changing school populations, and to changing times (Langer, 2002).

These staff members also know that their job as educators is never done. As a professional community, they are always at some part of a looking-in and looking-out cycle, assessing the effectiveness of what they are doing, exploring possibilities for improvement, experimenting with change—and when it works, making it happen. Students are very much part of such activities. They are sought after for feedback as well as suggestions for change. Their ideas are taken seriously. Community-minded schools have students on governance committees. In addition, teachers often canvas their classes for feedback about teaching approaches, activities, and materials—all with instructional improvement and finding ways to more fully engage their students as their goal.

Professional communities of this sort inevitably lead to changes in both how the teachers teach and what they teach; in their instructional approaches as well as in the broader curricular programs. They come to realize that beyond the contributions of individual wonderful teachers, students benefit most when they experience a connected and coherent program over time. It is when all teachers have a sense of who the students are and how they are doing, as well as what has come before and what students will learn later (ideally both within and across subject areas), that they can make content and experiential connections overt to students. For example, a teacher might say, “I know last year you learned about characterization and plot in mythology. I know you studied myths from a number of countries. Let’s discuss what you learned. . . . Now we’re going to discuss the same things—characterization and plot—but this time in relation to epics. What do you think an epic is?” This kind of connection seems so simple, but it is rarely done in most schools. Yet it makes a significant difference to students who have learned to treat each school year as a separate body of knowledge, instead of

realizing they have some useful background knowledge to which they can connect their new course work.

However, it is almost impossible for a teacher to help students make these connections unless there is a planning and sharing of the curriculum, a hub. In more effective schools teachers discuss what they are teaching at the moment and how, and share what worked and what needs to be picked up in the future—often by the next year's teacher. They look for connections across content, approaches, and grades, and they use this knowledge to help their students make links across time and experience. They discuss students' reactions to the content—what was difficult and what was easy, what was engaging and what was not—and plan ways in which problems might be ameliorated, not only during the year by a particular teacher, but also across years—before and after.

My studies have shown that whoever they are and however they have been doing at school, students enjoy becoming engaged with ideas they can question, challenge, discuss, and use to form their own interpretations (Langer 1995, 1997, 2001a, 2001b). Too often programmatic work such as the kind I have described is seen as being apart from students, but in the most effective schools, it never is. In more effective schools, whatever the student body, teachers search for ways to make the curriculum inviting and engaging, even enticing for their students, while also ensuring the coherence and connectedness that will result in the greatest cumulative and comprehensive learning. (For more on programmatic contexts, see Fullan, 1991; Langer, 2001a, 2001b, 2005a; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Peterson, McCarthy, & Elmore 1996; Siskin, 1994.)

Classroom Contexts

Like whole schools, classrooms have their own semiotics, and these can be more effective, less effective, or somewhere in between (see Kress et al., 2005). More effective classrooms visually show you who the students are, even when the room is empty. You see the products of student activity everywhere: photographs, writing, art, and projects of all sorts. If you look closely, you can see the students' thinking—about the content. It is

evident in the papers on the wall. Read them and you will see. In more effective schools you can hear the students' written ideas and their learners' voices. You can also tell whether the students were intellectually engaged in an activity and in the content. You can read the class and who its members are. One middle school class in New York tells it all. There are photographs of students at work and examples of a variety of their papers from across the semester on the walls. Sometimes students are asked to look at their older papers for ideas about the new—to make cognitive connections. Because there never is enough room for student work, the teacher took over the ceiling. Strings were fastened across the ceiling at many anchor points, and illustrated papers were hung on them with clothespins. You see the students' names as well as their work, and they greet visitors as well as students each day of the year.

When the students are in class, you can again hear their voices, even when you are not listening carefully to what they are saying. The social semiotic is often one of oral engagement, of real discussion about the ideas at hand, with enthusiasm. Students' ideas are front and center as they debate with each other and return to the text. Teachers help and teach, but are not the only voices. In addition to offering needed information and explanations, they guide students in where to find the material or evidence they need, help them inspect it, question it, and refine it. You can hear their students' cognitive engagement, whether they are working as a whole class, in groups, in pairs, or alone. They are on task and love it. As the bell rings and the students begin leaving class, their discussions continue. These are class contexts where students are hooked—even the lowest performing and most troubled of them. What a difference from less effective schools with a very different semiotic, where we see students' books stacked on their desks, arms folded on their books, and their heads resting on their arms—eyes half closed or fast asleep.

Critical and Creative Learning Context

If you listen to classroom talk, to what teachers and students say to one another, you can get a semiotic map of thought and

interaction. It is from this view of the classroom that you can get a sense of how the students are dealing with the content, the help they receive, and what they are learning. In more effective schools you see that discussion is dialogic (Nystrand, 1997). Students talk with one another, and the focus is sharply on the content.

That is, students are truly interacting with one another: sharing ideas, questioning, agreeing or disagreeing with, or adding to, each other's ideas. They are picking up on what others have said and using it to communicate with the group as a way to try out and shape their own ideas. In each case they tell why, and thus need to inspect what they and others have said. They learn to become critical. Their teachers have helped them learn how to locate and give evidence and to test it out as they test their ideas. They engage in highly literate conversations, ones that are thoughtful and thought provoking—where the course content is learned and refined by examining the ideas, what they mean, how they connect with other things the students know—where they learn to analyze and to be critical as they gain the power to make their ideas grow (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). They learn to be thinkers and learners as they are also learning the content.

In effective schools, during their conversations, students engage in envisionment building; their understandings are poised to change and grow as they develop and refine ideas through reading, writing, media activities, drama, discussion, and other class activities (Langer, 1990, 1995; Fillmore, 1982). In envisionment-building classrooms, it is assumed that ideas change and grow over time as one reads, writes, hears, and thinks. Therefore, teachers try to help students engage in “meaning in motion,” questioning ideas, leaving them open to new refinements and connections as they are in the act of gaining fuller understandings. In more effective classrooms, teachers do this in a number of ways.

First, they treat their students as lifelong envisionment builders. Teachers assume that by the time students have become adolescents, they have spent much of their lives building envisionments in their efforts to make sense of themselves and the world. They also have past experiences with liter-

acy and can make some connections with the content—given the chance. In the effective classroom context where teachers understand this, they invite students to further develop their understandings about the content and provide room for students to take ownership for their developing ideas. Activities abound. Students read, write, discuss—they gain ideas and do research using paper, media, and people as sources. They work with the teacher, in small groups, and in the whole class. They get feedback all the time in each of these groups (Adler & Rougle, 2005; Bomer, 1995). They look for help because they know that they are envisionment builders and their ideas are forming. Instead of copying, they think, question, challenge, revise, refine, and grow.

Because they need to keep open minds, teachers treat questions as part of the learning experience. When students ask questions, the teacher takes it to mean they are trying to go beyond what they presently understand, and helps them to do so in a way that accepts the students' knowledge as well as their efforts to go beyond. Students are encouraged to raise such issues as “I'm not sure about . . .”, “What if? . . .”, “It surprised me when . . .”, “I really didn't understand why . . .”. Questions and comments such as these are discussion starters that can serve to help all students revisit the material in new ways and to build beyond their initial understandings. This is very different from what happens in the less effective class, where teachers treat questions as evidence that a student has not learned well, didn't read the text or failed to do the homework. As a result, in less effective classes, students do not ask questions; they keep them to themselves, shutting off a critical part of the learning process.

In more effective classroom contexts teachers also treat class meetings as a time for students to further develop their understandings, rather than as a time to review what they might have missed. These teachers believe that, through questions and discussions, students can work through their misunderstandings and move beyond. The focus is forward, to what the students are working toward, rather than behind, on what they didn't get. Through such discussion, students also have an opportunity to explore multiple perspectives, those of other students, their teachers, and the more widely

accepted understandings in the field or parts of society. Thus, as their growing ideas are encouraged and as they are supplied with a context in which to try them out, students also have models of content and thought to inspect and learn from—and with which respectfully to disagree. And they know why they agree or disagree. For example, stories or social studies events can be revisited from a number of the participants' perspectives, from the perspective of history, culture, and tradition, as well as from the perspective of class, gender, and power. Through this sort of perspective taking, students can ask *what if* questions and explore possibilities. They can agree, disagree, defend, challenge, and ponder well-explained ideas, some that might extend or change their own views, others that they might disregard, and still others that they might hold as interesting alternatives to their own.

These more effective classrooms are intellectual playing grounds for the development of whole people who can engage in both critical and creative thinking (Langer, 1990, 1995). In some of my work, I refer to critical thinking as “point of reference” thinking. This is the type of thinking you do when you know the topic or point of the quest, but need to gain more information to understand it more fully or to reach the destination. Point of reference thinking offers an informational goal that can be built toward. Another type of thinking I call “exploring horizons of possibilities.” In this case, neither the topic nor the point is wholly understood; thus, students need to ask questions about understandings they have at the moment because these lead them to also consider possibilities about the whole (the point or topic or theme). In both cases students and teachers need to seek, find, and refine many ideas. Connections need to be made and checked out—but the kinds of thinking and what is thought about differ. Point of reference thinking involves more critical thinking strategies, whereas exploring horizons of possibilities involves more creative thinking strategies. The content students think about during point of reference thinking is more readily available for direct close inspection, but exploring horizons of possibilities, by its very nature, involves a more open-ended and broader search. Both modes of thinking are part of sharp and highly lit-

erate thought in all disciplines and in life. In more effective classes both happen in reading literary and informational texts, in all subjects. The two are a function of how the mind works as it is creating meaning, based on the student's purpose and available knowledge. Often one mode of thinking plays louder than the other and for a longer time during a particular activity, but then the thinker changes modes as new ideas or problems come to mind that the prior mode could not readily make sense of or solve. Each is used when it is more facilitative to the thinker's purpose. Thus, the two modes complement each other, as they enrich the kinds of thinking, as well as actual understandings and solutions, that occur.

But students often have many more opportunities to learn and practice critical rather than creative thinking in their course work, where the focus is on reading for a particular goal (e.g., the causes of the French and Indian War, the behavior of the digestive system, or the mythical allusions in a sonnet). These are all important in content learning, but creative thinking is an additional dimension. This is what happens in the more effective schools, where students are encouraged to ask an array of open-ended questions, to explore possibilities in a variety of ways, and are given the materials and experiences that help them do this. They engage in activities that help them question their present understandings and see how new possibilities might move them to reshape their understandings of the war, the digestive system, or the sonnet. More effective classrooms, in all subject areas, provide an instructional environment that invites richer and more varied thinking within and across the two modes. To ensure this environment, teachers make available a variety of knowledge sources, including a range of paper, media, human, and other potentially useful knowledge-bearing sources to stimulate students' thinking and understanding of the topics they are studying and their relations to big issues within the particular discipline and in life (Applebee, 1996). They also support students' engagement in both critical and creative thinking about the content and help students learn to judge when one approach is more helpful or appropriate than the other; together, critical and creative thinking permit a wider range of ideas to be

considered and a deeper range of understandings to develop. In more effective classrooms, close inspection, analysis, discovery, and invention all have a place. Such classrooms are stimulating places of learning.

Classroom Community Contexts

The last aspect of the classroom context that I discuss here is the affect in the classroom. In more effective schools, classrooms indeed become working, living, and thriving classroom communities. The participants know each other as people and as learners. Although critical and creative envisionments are built in these contexts, they are also social contexts for real interaction. Students reach out to one another, they help one another, they challenge one another, and they correct one another. They are not antagonists, but colleagues; there is a sense of belonging they feel in which their interactions and learning (about self as well as content) are an important and beneficial outgrowth. They may not be friends outside school, but within the class they are important to one another. They learn to hear one another and understand that how each individual reads the social situation, as well as course content, is bound up in that person's past experiences—social, personal, and educational. Because they listen to each other, they learn that each student has something new and worthwhile to give to, as well as to take from, the group. Without realizing it, as a group, they help each other develop and change—personally and educationally. In more effective schools such as the ones I have been describing, even the teachers change. With each new group of students come new individuals to learn to work with, new ideas and knowledge to think about, and new activities. The teachers' responsiveness to the individuality of each group contributes to the development of the class community. It is coconstructed.

For example, in describing her teaching approach, a teacher in New York said to me, "In one sense, every year the material I teach is the same but the students are different. But it isn't really that way. Both are really new. Although there is a body of knowledge I want each group to learn, I need to go about it differently each year, because of who they are and what they know and what

they've studied and how they've been taught. So, in a way, it's all new each year. I don't use all the same materials each year, but if I do, I use them in different ways. And I don't use exactly the same activities each year, but when I do, I don't necessarily use them in the same ways. Some stay the same but I decide based on the class. Even when the materials and activities are the same, the students react to them in different ways, so I have to handle the lessons differently. My goal is to get them thinking about the material and to get them working together as a group, whatever it takes." (For more information about classroom contexts, see the chapters in Part II of this volume, as well as Adler & Rougle, 2005; Bomer, 1995; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Guthrie & Alvermann, 1998; Moje & Hinchman, 2004.)

Less effective classrooms are a far cry from what this teacher described. Students often work alone and have less opportunity to get to know one another as learners. Teachers often focus more on the material to be covered than on the students who need to learn it and how to help them feel connected to the class and to the content. Lessons from year to year are often the same. A veteran teacher in a Texas school, attempting to be helpful to a new teacher, went to her cupboard and lifted out two very large piles of papers. She said, "Here are my lesson plans and class work for the course. They start here, and this (pointing) is the end of the year. I've been using them for years and they're great, so you just need to follow them." The students in this class were a community of a different sort. Instead of getting to know each other and getting to grow together, they worked together to figure out the teacher and what she wanted, as a way to get through the class. They wandered into class, worked separately or in pairs, figuring out the answers they thought their teacher wanted. Both this classroom and the aforementioned effective classrooms were communities, yet the ethos of each community was as different as the ways the students interacted with and about the content.

DISCUSSION

I have explored several contexts for literacy in this chapter as a way to emphasize the

many semiotic vectors that are at play within a school—semiotic because there are sights, sounds, and artifacts that resound with messages throughout the school: in the yard, entryways, halls, offices, meeting rooms, and classrooms. What messages do they convey, more or less effectively? Even the telephones and computers are meaning laden. Are they objects for easy communication and sharing, or are they not?

Each context I have described can be considered a semiotic vector through which to view literacy education, what is facilitating and what is limiting it. Some are broader contexts and some more particular. Some focus on the school, some on the professionals, some on the programs, and some on the classrooms. When you look closely, with a zoom lens, more can be said about each context, and contexts-within-contexts can be pulled out to be examined. For example, if you look carefully at the variety of the more effective school contexts I have discussed, you can get an indication of their attitudes regarding diversity, student behavior, or tolerance. But to understand the features influencing each school's effectiveness better, we would need to pull each out within several contexts for closer examination.

I trust I have written enough for the reader to guess how the contexts discussed in this chapter might differ in more or less effective settings, and why. However, it would be enlightening to look closely at both kinds of settings. Both more and less effective schools are contexts that need to be examined more fully both by teachers who are working in classrooms on a day-to-day basis and by researchers who want to understand them in ways that can drive pedagogy, decision making, and substantive changes at the secondary level.

As stated earlier in this chapter, my studies have indicated that what I have described as the more effective schools are also the more successful schools (Langer, 2002). Students in these schools and classes do better both in their course work at school and on their high-stakes tests than students who are in other schools with students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Are there schools that are somewhere in between what I have described as more effective and more typical? In a sense, there are. Some schools have some aspects of both types. How well do

they do? Not terribly well. My research indicates that students in more effective schools have, on average, higher test scores and better course performance than students in schools that do not have all the features of effective schools. It takes all of the more effective contexts I have described to make a shift in school culture, class culture, and student performance. All these more effective features need to be in place to make a difference; a few features do not suffice to make a school an effective context for adolescent literacy. Together, these multiple, overlapping contexts reflect one pedagogical vision of how good schools work for everyone. They have at their root the understanding that humane and thinking communities, based on respect for difference, love of learning, and a goal of agency through knowledge and literate thinking, support student learning. They want to graduate literate learners for life, and student learning in more effective schools indicates that this can happen.

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