

When third space is more than the library:
The complexities of theorizing and learning to use family and community resources
to teach elementary literacy and mathematics

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Paper presented at the
Sociocultural Perspectives on Teacher Education and Development conference
University of Oxford
7-8 April, 2008

Abstract

In this paper, we examine theory and practice related to creating spaces for pre-service teachers to learn about incorporating family and community resources into elementary mathematics and literacy. Our framework for understanding pre-service teacher learning related to families and communities as resources for both mathematics and literacy instruction locates this learning as happening concurrently in an elementary school, in the community in which the elementary school is located, and in university classrooms. Furthermore, we operationalize teacher learning as changes in:

- Personal narratives of self as a learner and teacher.
- Professional identities and practices as elementary teachers.
- Understandings of the mathematics and literacy practices and resources of children, families, and communities.

We are especially interested in understanding the “third spaces” and overlaps that are highlighted by this model of teacher learning. In particular, in this paper, we are focusing on the overlaps inherent in the last element of pre-service teacher learning – related to the literacy and mathematics practices and resources of children, families, and communities – and the tensions, challenges, and benefits of exploring and supporting pre-service teachers in learning about these overlaps in three intersecting spaces – elementary school, community, and university.

Introduction

“Kids are so smart. Can you believe in these remnants of writing that they leave behind that they give us clues to what they are thinking, what they understand, and who they are becoming? If only we as teachers remember to pay attention to these little slices of insight into their developing abilities.” (Maria, a junior in teacher education)

The study we present in this paper focuses on students like Maria who learned to examine “remnants” of student learning through the lens of “funds of knowledge” and through recognizing the rich resources that are present in the lives of students and the very communities where they live. She made the above comment as she sat at a table examining written artifacts from the students in her first grade practicum classroom.

Across the profession, there are growing calls for teacher candidates to be better prepared to meet the demands of working with students and families from all backgrounds (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). One approach to preparing pre-service teachers to work productively with diverse students is to support them in learning how to use the varied “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) of students, families, and communities as instructional resources for elementary teaching. Despite a growing body of research on the existence and instructional value of these funds of knowledge, relatively little work has explored how pre-service teachers might learn to access or leverage these funds as resources in their own instructional practices (though Rodriguez & Kitchen, 2005, and Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, provide recent examples of important work in this area).

Two cohorts of elementary pre-service teachers participated in a pilot partnership between a university teacher education program and a local elementary school. This partnership was designed to help pre-service teachers learn about incorporating family

and community resources into literacy and mathematics instruction.

During a recent meeting with key administrators at our institution, we attempted to describe our work with pre-service teachers. At the conclusion of our presentation and theorizing our work using cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and the conceptualization of “third space,” one administrator commented, “So, you are telling us that third space is what happens in the library at the elementary school when you co-teach your methods courses together?” It was at that moment, in the naiveté of his response, that we began to understand the complexities of theorizing our work. It is our goal with this paper to examine the complexities of using CHAT (informed by the work of Vygotsky, 1978) to understand the spaces, resources and tools that we see to be taken up (or not) in this research and teacher education study.

In this paper, we present a *documentary account* of findings and stories from this partnership, as well as artifacts that provide evidence of the successes, challenges, and learning that resulted from the partnership. These artifacts serve to share the wide range of pre-service teacher perspectives related to our central research questions:

- 1) How are family and community literacy and mathematics practices taken up (or not taken up) in/by everyone involved in this partnership, including pre-service teachers, elementary teachers and administrators, and university faculty?
- 2) What do the overlaps, or third spaces, among the various communities of practice and funds of knowledge involved in this partnership look like?
 - What are the boundaries, key activities, tools, and resources that define these overlaps?
 - What are the roles of university faculty, elementary teachers, and pre-service teachers in creating, maintaining, negotiating, and expanding these overlaps?

Theoretical Framework

Critical sociocultural theory demands that we reflexively examine our positioning as researchers and its effects on learning and the production of knowledge. Viewing research this way also means that we must

understand the role of our own autobiographies, or histories of participation, as well as the histories of our research participants. (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. xi)

In this paper, we examine theory and practice related to creating spaces for pre-service teachers to learn about incorporating family and community resources into elementary mathematics and literacy. Our framework for understanding pre-service teacher learning related to families and communities as resources for mathematics and literacy instruction locates this learning as happening concurrently in an elementary school, in the community in which the elementary school is located, and in university classrooms (See Figure 1 for a visual representation of our model for this work).

Furthermore, we operationalize teacher learning as changes in:

- Personal narratives of self as a learner and teacher.
- Professional identities and practices as elementary teachers.
- Understandings of the mathematics and literacy practices and resources of children, families, and communities.

We are especially interested in understanding the “third spaces” and overlaps that are created and highlighted by this framework for investigating teacher learning. In particular, in this paper, we are focusing on the overlaps inherent in the last element of pre-service teacher learning – related to the literacy and mathematics practices and resources of children, families, and communities – and the tensions, challenges, and benefits of exploring and supporting pre-service teachers in learning about these overlaps in three intersecting spaces – elementary school, community, and university.

This partnership, and the research being done in and on the partnership, builds on two theoretical perspectives – funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005;

Moll & Greenberg, 1990) and third space (Moje et al., 2004). These two theoretical constructs are being used to understand the multiple overlaps, or third spaces, being created through this university-school collaboration – including overlaps between mathematics and literacy, between university-based and school/community-based instruction, and between family/community funds of knowledge and school-based funds of knowledge. Within this framework, we seek to understand how the interactions of various participants and knowledge resources in these overlapping spaces helps everyone involved in the project to, “... change our perspective of our students’ homes and communities from, at best, being irrelevant to the educational process ... to being rich resources for teaching and learning,” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, p. 14). In particular, we are interested in how the third spaces are created and sustained, what the boundaries and activities that defines each of these third spaces are, and how funds of knowledge from different, and previously isolated, spaces (school, university, families, communities) are taken up (or not) in interactions within the newly created third spaces.

A third perspective that informs our work is a recognition of pre-service teacher identities. One challenge of teacher education programs is to understand how to help university students integrate their histories of personal *figured worlds* of schooling and past *relational identities* (Holland, et al., 1998) as students and adolescents with emerging identities as teachers and adults (Graue, 2005). Figured worlds are sociohistoric “‘as if’ worlds” (Holland, et al., 1998), collectively imagined into being and sustained by groups of people, that create contexts for interpreting and mediating cultural meanings and activity. A classroom indexes figured worlds that range from a one-room schoolhouse to a high school calculus class, from a first grade writers’ workshop to a

university lecture hall. As people participate in figured worlds, they take up relational identities that position themselves and others in complementary and/or opposing identities. Pre-service teachers in the process of becoming (Bakhtin, 1981; Britzman, 1991; Freedman & Ball, 2004) navigate between identities; they are not yet teachers but are more than students. In these positions, they participate in the figured world of teacher education by taking up multiple identities, for example, as students in relation to instructors in a university methods course. In this paper, we focus on emerging teacher identities as they engage with children, families and practicing teachers in this partnership project. We explore the pivotal nature of this experience for shifting identities and roles for pre-service teachers as well as supporting them in their development of critical assessors of classroom practice.

Description of Partnership and Activities

The data for this study were collected at a Mid-Western university in the United States. The institution is a land grant institution with a particular focus on agriculture, science, technology, and extension activities. Approximately 500 students are enrolled in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and literacy and mathematics methods are two of the first methods courses students take in the elementary teacher education program. The literacy and mathematics methods courses follow admission to the program, a general practicum, an introductory curriculum and instruction methods course, social foundations of education, and educational psychology. As a part of the expectations for the methods courses, the students participate in a practicum for a minimum of 40 hours in an elementary classroom setting. The students must be classified as juniors to enroll and most are first semester juniors or in their 3rd year of a

four-year college experience. Further information about the participants in this study can be found in Figure 2.

As part of this study, pre-service teachers began in Week 3 of the 15-week semester spending time at a local elementary school that serves a significant number of English Language Learners. Initially, they spent two hours per week at the school, with the time gradually increasing until they were spending two full days per week at the school towards the end of the semester. Participating pre-service teachers participated in a number of activities designed to support them in learning about family and community as instructional resources including community literacy and mathematics ethnographies and community resource projects. At the same time, the pre-service teachers worked with small groups of students on literacy and mathematics interviews, assessments, and tutoring, paying particular attention to accessing and understanding family and community resources and using them to plan instruction for their students.

The local elementary school provided an interesting context for this work because its student body was in the process of significant demographic transition due to school closures, redrawn district boundaries, and increasing rates of immigration and poverty in the local community. At the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, nearly 200 out of 256 students in the school were new to the school (Zientara, 2006). During the year of this project, the student mobility rate at the elementary school was approximately 41%, more than twice that at any other school in the district.

Data Sources and Methodology

In this study, we sought to understand pre-service teachers' experiences in the multiple and overlapping spaces of learning from their own perspectives. We were

interested in the activities, roles, ideas, and identities that pre-service teachers found particularly relevant or important to their learning, especially as it related to family and community funds of knowledge. We were also interested in aspects of their experiences that pre-service teachers identified as constraining their learning and aspects that introduced tension or provided occasions for critical assessment. In order to address these questions, we employed a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis and drew on interpretive research methodologies as described by Erickson, “Interpretive fieldwork research involves being unusually thorough and reflective in noticing and describing every day events in the field setting, and in attempting to identify the significance of actions in the events from the various points of view of the actors themselves” (Erickson, 1986, p. 121).

Our data sources included interviews (with both pre-service and in-service teachers), reflective blogs, pre-service teacher written work (including community literacy and mathematics ethnographies, community resource projects, lesson plans, and reflections), field notes and artifacts. In this paper, we focus in particular on the pre-service teachers’ reflections and blogs, with supporting evidence from the interview data and other artifacts. The data were analyzed using emergent coding. We identified initial themes during a first read through the data and then used those themes to code the full set of data.

We focus our findings on “defining the overlaps” that developed through our partnership with the local elementary school. In doing so, we focus both on those overlaps that were productive for teacher learning, as well as those that were not. In order to define the overlaps, we identify the key roles, identities, and tensions that characterized

pre-service teachers' participation in the overlapping spaces.

Findings

While both the project and the analyses are ongoing, we have begun to identify critical elements defining the overlapping, or third, spaces in the pre-service teachers' experiences. In the next three sections, we describe these findings with respect to pre-service teachers' roles, identities, and tensions.

Roles. Pre-service teachers took on a variety of roles within these overlapping spaces. Within the university classrooms, their roles were fairly clearly defined – as students. However, within the elementary classrooms, their roles ranged from guests to observers to helpers to teachers. Often, these roles shifted over the course of the semester as pre-service teachers became more comfortable in the elementary classrooms and as cooperating and pre-service teachers worked together to create spaces for pre-service teacher participation as reflected in the following pre-service teacher blog entries (from three separate pre-service teachers):

Once the [cooperating] teacher began to have me work with the students one-on-one I soon learned that the majority of my portion of the semester in this classroom will be spent with two students in particular.

So I figured I would just be observing. This was not the case. I was totally emerged in everything they did.

I'm starting to get more and more excited to be there all day and to become a teacher.

Within the family and community spaces, pre-service teachers were typically positioned as guests or newcomers, despite the fact they typically lived in or near the community (though generally not in the immediate neighborhood of the elementary school).

Negotiating this range and variety of roles within the individual spaces, and then in the

overlaps, often presented a challenge to pre-service teachers.

One example of attempting to negotiate the various roles for the pre-service teachers appeared in Dean's end of the year digital story (all names used are pseudonyms). The digital story assignment was the culminating experience for the pre-service teachers in these methods courses. The assignment was to create a digital story using various media (pictures, words, video, audio, and movement) to tell us the story of their learning this semester. Dean chose to create an iMovie using Comic Life where he created two images of himself: 1) Dean as the character "Assimilate" and 2) Dean as the character "Accommodate." As the movie progresses, he is attacked by his arch nemesis, "PROCRASTINATION." How does Dean move beyond his student identity and desire to procrastinate? According to Dean, he does this through his desire to learn to be the best teacher he can be and with the realization that a classroom full of students is counting on him each day. Within this digital story, Dean illuminated the various roles he had to play in this experience of learning to be a teacher.

In addition, a pre-service teacher named Angie mentioned in her written reflection about her first teaching lesson in a third grade classroom:

. . . it was difficult for me to just do the basal lesson the teacher gave me to do (out of the scripted teacher's manual). I have so many ideas going on in my head about things I want to try and how I want to challenge the kids with real books but I also know my place, right now I am the student, I am a guest in (the teacher's) classroom but that doesn't mean I am not dying to try out my own ideas!

Identities. Despite the challenges created by the need to negotiate among multiple roles, we found that this role tension, particularly in the overlapping spaces, was often what prompted pre-service teachers to begin to shift in their perceptions of themselves from students to teachers and, in some cases, from classroom-based teachers to

classroom- and community-based teachers (For instance, see Figure 3 for pre-service teacher Andrea's depiction of her shifting identity over time). Over time, many pre-service teachers shifted from observing events in classrooms as learners completing university assignments to using what they observed to draw connections to what they were planning to do as teachers.

However, there was a tension in many of these statements in that the pre-service teachers' participation in the community and family space was limited relative to their participation in the university and elementary classrooms. Therefore, even as pre-service teachers began to identify themselves as soon-to-be teachers, they sometimes continued to voice deficit views of parents:

When I am teaching I will work hard to be in close contact with the parents so the parents know how their students are progressing in school.

I think that I, as a teacher, will attempt to expose parents to these opportunities through simple homework assignment(s) that expose to student to mathematics in the real world contexts.

On the other hand, pre-service teachers who engaged more directly with families – or who participated in elementary classrooms that included more opportunities for parent engagement - tended to voice different identities in relation to parents, families, and community resources:

When I become a teacher I think I will make it a great habit to involve the student's parents as much as possible in my classroom. My 1st grade [cooperating] teacher made it a habit to involve parents to come to the classroom for Royal Readers, and I found that both the students and the parents were very excited about the experience.

I have come to the realization that when students are given the opportunity to create unique experiences to tie to their learning, they are more open to the ideas and are better able to recall the information. Therefore, as a future teacher, I want to utilize all of the possible resources that are available to my students and me.

It was inspiring to me as a future teacher to know that you can create ‘field trips’ that cost no money, have academic significance, and also pay tribute to learning that takes place in the community.

Given that identity is often defined as and through participation in particular communities of practice (e.g., Wenger, 1998), it makes sense that pre-service teachers’ identities shifted as they participated in multiple, and overlapping, spaces. Through these data, the pre-service teachers’ figured worlds were revealed. We also gained insight into pre-service teachers’ emerging teacher identities as they engaged with children, families and practicing teachers in this partnership project. The pivotal aspect of this experience was that it provided spaces for pre-service teachers to shift among and try on various identities and roles.

Amber (another pre-service teacher) created a digital story that illuminated this shift from her personal worlds as a college student to the responsibilities and thinking of a professional. Her digital story opens with her sleeping with a smile on her face with the words “Gone are the days of sleeping in, 10:00 a.m. classes, and textbook reading” to here are the days of “the alarm clock going off very early, putting on my teacher costume, and off to face a group of children who love to read, and remind me why I liked to read – before textbooks.”

Maria shared a similar transformation in her digital story - taking the observer on her journey from an elementary student who loved to read and engage in mathematical investigations, to a high school student who found her love of the novel, to the college student who studies her craft, to the developing teacher who has the opportunity to daily pull her chair up alongside a child and ask, “Tell me about your work . . .” She revealed

in her journey her figured worlds and her emerging identity as a teacher. This experience created a space for her to wonder about what she will learn from her students and how to begin with what they know, their funds of knowledge, and to create a curriculum that will challenge and stretch each one of her students. Inevitably, as Maria stated, “This is no easy task, when in so many situations, teachers and schools miss the chance to even see what children have for funds of knowledge.” Thus, the tension emerges.

Tensions: Pre-Service Teachers as Critical Assessors of Practices. As pre-service teachers worked to develop their identities as teachers, tensions across the overlapping spaces became more apparent. The pre-service teachers became “critical assessors of practices” as they sorted through differences and conflicts in the practices and ideas they were experiencing in each of these spaces. Often, this critical assessment took the form of identifying classroom practices that did not seem to be in the best interests of children:

Apparently, math learning for these students seems to take place in the form of worksheets.

The idea of so many children hating math really bothers me and with all the worksheets and monotonous work that they are asked to do, who can blame them?

On other occasions, the critical assessments focused on differences between the practices discussed and exemplified in the university classrooms and those experienced in the elementary classroom or – in some cases - between one elementary classroom and another. The pre-service teachers did not necessarily evaluate whether one set of ideas or practices was in some way “better” than the others – instead, they simply focused on identifying and trying to make sense of the contrasts:

Although I understand the significance of teaching math and literacy together, I didn't see overwhelming evidence of this in the two classrooms where I was placed.

...while one cooperating teacher really enjoyed giving students worksheets, my other cooperating teacher really focused on interacting with the students and having them complete projects to understand a certain topic.

The kids and the teacher were very welcoming. I found the teacher's teaching style to be very traditional, but effective.

One set of tensions that arose for us as teacher educators in regards to the overlapping spaces was how to make practices and ideas related to literacy and mathematics in each of the spaces more visible to all of the participants. For instance, in many cases we believed that there were literacy and mathematics practices ongoing in the community and elementary classroom spaces that we did not have access to and therefore could not make visible to the pre-service teachers. In another case, the pre-service teachers in one cooperating teacher's classroom did not "see" or recognize significant family engagement practices occurring in the classroom even though we, as teacher educators (and parents) were able to notice and appreciate these practices. An ongoing question for us, then, focused on how to gain meaningful access to all of the spaces (and their overlaps) and how to support pre-service teachers in developing lenses for seeing more of what happens in elementary and community spaces.

In Bettina's digital story, she told the story of a child who she continually observed was marginalized by the system. She titled her digital story, "Just a bunch of scribbles," and she tells the story of first meeting a second grade child who sat in the back of the classroom. While others wrote stories, this child simply made scribbles across the page. The child, who received special education services, sat on the edges of the

classroom so Bettina recognized that the teacher was giving him a message just by his location in the classroom. One day, Bettina decided to sit down next to him and asked him to tell her a story – he did, and then they began to write it together. The classroom teacher came by and said, “Oh, he doesn’t write, why don’t you find someone else to work with today?” The child turned his paper back over and returned to creating his scribbles across the page. Bettina concluded her digital story with a promise to never marginalize a child with her words or actions or fail to see the potential in “just a bunch of scribbles.”

Finally, Gabby - in her lesson plan reflection with fifth grade students - struggled with the narrow definitions of literacy and teacher knowledge that are presented in scripted programs. She struggled with the disconnect between what is known about learning and how the scripted program works against learning –and against teaching:

I must say, this basal is very anti-intellectual. The script implies that I cannot think or make decisions about what children can learn and should learn. There is no place for me to build on children’s prior knowledge and tap into their funds of knowledge. It is apparent why children are becoming unmotivated to read and to learn with such mundane texts and why teachers are leaving the profession – where is the trust and the intellectual engagement for teachers?

Conclusion and Implications.

“The research . . . compels us to give greater emphasis than usual to the institutional, historical, and cultural contexts within which individuals are constituted and which include as well as exclude particular relationships and meanings” (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje 2007, p. xi)

The use of sociocultural theory allows us to account for larger systems of power as they both shape and are shaped by individuals in particular contexts. As described above in the theoretical overview, our primary interest as designers of this new program was in the multiple overlaps, or third spaces, created through integrating 1) mathematics

and literacy, 2) university-based, school-based, and community-based instruction, and 3) family/community knowledge and school-based knowledge. A persisting challenge for us as teacher educators is how to continue to expand and sustain these overlaps so that pre-service teachers can put ideas about funds of knowledge into practice. At the same time, we must ourselves be critical assessors of our own practices as we work to understand the overlap (or lack thereof) between our ideas about classroom and community literacy and mathematics and the ideas and practices of the elementary classroom teachers, families, community members, and, of course, children.

As we reviewed and analyzed our multiple sources of data, we became aware of the “double binds” that emerged for our pre-service teachers as they learned to negotiate the various roles and identities of their figured worlds while simultaneously developing as critical assessors of classroom practice. The term “double binds” has been used by several researchers to refer to large-scale societal dilemmas that are insolvable by individual action (Engeström, 1990, Lundell & Beach, 2002, Wohlgend, 2008). The pre-service teachers wanted to succeed and meet the expectations of the professors, teachers, supervisors, and certifying body. At the same time, they were confronted by - and critical of - the very ways that schools are structured to work against exploring the funds of knowledge and resources present in families, homes, and communities. In many cases, the pre-service teachers came up against a deficit view of the relationships among families, literacy, and mathematics. Yet, the experiences they had when examining the research, working with children, exploring the community, and talking with parents showed them the strengths that are present in both the lives of the people they met and the spaces they investigated. For us, as the teachers of these methods courses, we are

reminded that “teaching and learning are a complex mix of intentional choices and unexamined compliance” (Wohlwend, 2008). The reality is that the “double binds” themselves become the spaces of mediation and provide the opportunity to examine teacher choice and agency that can lead to “strategic shifts from one identity position to the next, opening opportunities for resistance and critique” (Wohlwend, 2008).

In conclusion, we are compelled to go back to the question posed by our administrator, “So, you are telling us that third space is what happens in the library at the elementary school when you co-teach your methods courses together?” We believe there is a simple answer to that question, “Yes, and so much more.” Third space is not only a physical location, but a space where our students are allowed to explore their figured worlds, to engage in the act of becoming while simultaneously engaging and struggling with ideas and practices related to learning, teaching, and funds of knowledge, and to begin to understand how those ideas and practices play out within and across the multiple and overlapping spaces of university, elementary school, and community.

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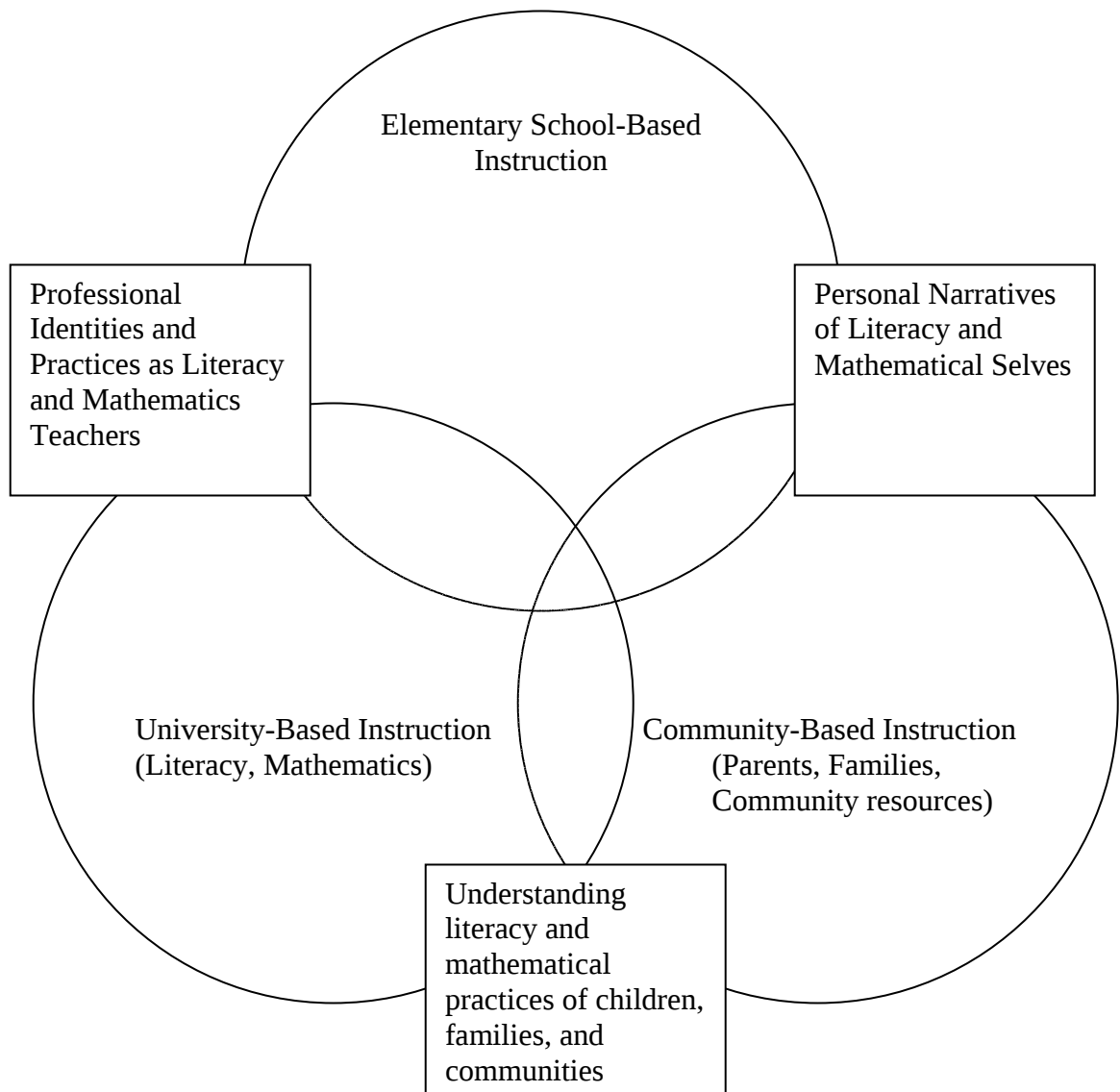


Figure 1 Model of the theoretical framework that guides our work

	Total number of students	Female	Male	Non- Traditional Students	Diversity
Session 1 Fall 2006	24	21	3	2	1 Hispanic
Session 2 Spring 2007	26	21	5	3	3 Asian

Figure 2 Overview of the participants in this study

My Motor Mouth

By Andrea

Past

"Andrea, Shut Up," demands dad.

"Andrea, not now, I am trying to watch ER," mentions mom.

"Andrea, you need to raise your hand," tells the teacher.

"Andrea, do you ever stop talking?" asks my aunt.

"Andrea, tell me later," groans grandma.

"Andrea, you're annoying," says my sister.

Present

"Tell me what happened, Andrea," directs dad.

"You use your social skills well, Andrea," mentions mom.

"Nice answer, Andrea," tells the teacher.

"How did you get to be so funny, Andrea?" asks the aunt.

"I'm so proud of you and your hard work, Andrea," says my sister.

Future

"We are so proud of you," praise the parents.

"Mommy, tell me a story," chant my children.

"Teacher, read us a book," sing the students.

"Darling, can you repeat that?" hums my husband.

"You don't call enough," mentions mom.

"Look forward to hearing from you soon," says the sister.

Figure 3. Andrea's Reflection on Her Shifting Identities Over Time