Literacy Worlds of Children of Migrant Farmworker Communities Participating in a Migrant Head Start Program

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Within this ethnographic case study, I examine the ways that a Migrant Head Start program failed to build on the funds of language and literacy knowledge of a group of socioculturally and linguistically marginalized preschool children. Using a literacy-as-social-practice lens, I explore the children’s early literacy knowledge by focusing on the ways that reading and writing mediate the lives of the migrant farmworker community—their parents’ and community members’ lives. Observational and interview data analysis revealed literacy practices in the migrant camps that reflected their lives of bureaucratic regulation, family and community relationships, and spirituality in the migrant camps. Participant observation in the Migrant Head Start program revealed a school-based focus on only surface features of early literacy, delivered in an unfamiliar language and reflecting culturally specific beliefs and values about literacy practice that did not match those of most of the children. Analysis also revealed the ways that literacy practice among the migrant farmworkers moved and changed as the individual life experiences of the families changed, particularly in relation to increased geographic permanence over time.

The vastness of the countryside is both overwhelming and somewhat oppressive. As I drive down the long, straight roads (going 55 to 60 miles per hour with everyone else), all I see are flat fields and occasional trees, although the county, itself, is characterized by rolling hills. Out where the camps are, it seems flatter, though. The heat and humidity are already with you all the time. This is early in the season, so the corn is about 1½ feet tall on one side and a newly planted field (of what?) is on the other with just little green shoots showing up through the mud (and standing water); we’ve had a lot of rain. The cabbages are big now, though, and I saw a group of about eight men working in one of the fields—all had long shirts, jeans, and white or colored bandanas around their heads. Some had straw hats on. It is very quiet with only the buzz of the insects. In the camps, you can hear the groups of children playing—looks like tag or some sort of ball game. They run barefoot on the soft green grass that surrounds a lot of the fields. They also walk barefoot on the sharp rocks that surround their trailers/homes. (from researcher journal, mid-June, second summer session)
I wrote the description above when I returned for a second summer to the site of my case study of literacy practice among migrant farmworkers and the preschool attended by their children. By this time I could actually “see” the women and men working in the fields and knew where the camps were located. This perceptual skill was acquired slowly over the course of my first summer spent working in the preschool and visiting the camps. At first, I could not spot farmworkers in the fields nor their camps as I drove past farm after farm. They were literally and phenomenologically invisible to my outsider’s eyes. Invisibility is a reality of marginalization, in my experience. With this ethnographic case study report, I hope to allow others, particularly educators who care about the perpetual underachievement of children from marginalized communities, to get close-up and begin to see and know the men, women, and children who populate their classrooms.

My position is that educators must learn to recognize and learn the nature of community-based knowledge held by socially, culturally, and linguistically marginalized children before curriculum can be developed that is culturally relevant for such children (Guerra, 1998; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004). I use a literacy development lens because that is my field of expertise—in both classroom experience and research—and because literacy achievement is so basic to academic achievement and to social upward mobility (although see Graff, 1979, for another view of the link between literacy and social mobility, something that is highly desired by the migrant farmworker families for their children).

**Theoretical Frame**

This research into the language and literacy funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) of preschool children from migrant farmworker communities is situated within a theoretical lens that views literacy as human practice and activity (Vygotsky, 1978) that mediate the lives of literate peoples. Viewing literacy as situated within social contexts stands in opposition to the view that literacy is a set of skills, isolated from contexts of use. Within the situated view, literacy practices reflect the social, cultural, historical, and political lives of the sociocultural communities in which they are embedded (Street, 1984). Thus, one can begin to understand the socially situated lives of participants by identifying and studying their varied practices of literacy, and vice versa.

Within this frame, emergent literacy theory asserts that young children acquire their foundational understandings of literacy within their own communities of practice before they begin formal literacy instruction in school (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Emergent literacy research documents the ways that literacy achievement in school is built on this foundation of early literacy concepts that children acquire in their literacy practice communities. Thus, educators wishing to provide beginning literacy instruction that is meaningful and productive of future literacy development and achievement must adopt a learner stance (Freire, 1993) toward their students’ home literacy environments.
This learner stance assumes that all students bring with them to formal literacy instruction socioculturally constructed bodies of knowledge that can be productively built upon by teachers. However, as pointed out by critical theorists (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the nature of such knowledge held by children from communities marginalized via constructs such as language, class, gender, and/or race is more often devalued and/or omitted within schools. This devaluing of children’s culture, language, and knowledge leads to a devastating profile of underachievement, low graduation rates, and severe underrepresentation in college admissions and/or completions.

The present study was undertaken from a socio-cognitive theoretical position (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004) with a focus on early literacy learning. This position reflects the situated literacy perspective and the emergent literacy lens described above. My goal was to identify the funds of literacy knowledge held by young migrant farmworker children by exploring the ways that literacy practice mediated the lives of their parents and their communities. I also wished to use the results of this exploration in an analysis of the early literacy curriculum of the Migrant Head Start program attended by the children. Finally, my goal is to contribute to the design of early childhood language and literacy curriculum that would “speak” to migrant farmworker children.

Review of Relevant Research

*Children of Migrant Farmworkers*

Migrant farmworkers, as conceptualized in this paper, are farmworkers who migrate among farms, following the seasons and the crops as they are planted and then harvested. Although I focus on families of Mexican origin in this study, migrant farmworkers can be from any country, including the United States, and speak any language, including the language of the countries in which they work. Migrant farmworkers supply the labor for farm work in countries around the world. Although they are often considered “marginalized,” they do not function “on the margins” of societies but rather dominant societies develop around them, due to their central role in maintaining the economies of the countries in which they work (Freire, 1993).

To my knowledge, no research exists that provides insights into the sociocultural and linguistic funds of knowledge of young children of migrant farmworkers. Neither did I encounter research that sought to learn about and document the literacy practices of migrant farmworkers in the United States. The dominant perspective on children of migrant farmworkers is, for the most part, government-sponsored research reports of struggle and marginalization. According to Salerno (1991), children of migrant farmworkers are among the most educationally disadvantaged children in the United States. Discontinuity in education and the physical risks of farm work, with frequent exposure to pesticides and long hours working alongside their families in the fields, render their lives difficult. The literature on children of migrant farmworkers further emphasizes such risk factors as social and cultural isolation (Cox et al., 1992). It was my intent with this study, as part
of exploring the ways literacy mediated the farmworkers’ lives, to give texture and life to these statistics, providing a more complex perspective from the ground of the lived realities of the families and children.

**Research on Mexican-Origin Communities**

A body of research does exist, though, on other Mexican-origin communities in the United States, and several of these works focus on literacy practices (e.g., Ceballos, 2012; de la Piedra & Araujo, 2012; de la Piedra & Guerra, 2012; Farr, 2006, 2010; González, 2001; Guerra, 1998; Smith & Murillo, 2012; Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, Shannon, & Moll, 1994). These researchers provide a view of Mexican-origin peoples as *transfronterizos* (de la Piedra & Guerra, 2012) or transnationalists (Ceballos, 2012). This perspective captures the sense of people living in (at least) two different worlds and moving fluidly back and forth between them. It depends on the very real existence of the geo-national border separating the United States and Mexico. While this study took place in the northern United States, the presence of the US-Mexican border was phenomenologically very near as the participants lived about half of their lives in Texas, Florida, or Mexico. They all had family in Mexico, with whom most of them communicated on a regular basis.

As with my study, the participants in the studies of other Mexican-origin communities included Mexican-Americans (often by several generations) and recent immigrants. A central theme running through these studies is the diversity within Mexican-origin communities. Rejecting the concept of culture as monolithic and homogenous, assuming that all members of a culture share the same behaviors, language ideologies, and values, the current body of research with Mexican-origin communities focuses on the lived experiences of individuals (González, 2001; Moll & González, 1997) and how these experiences can lead to insights into the ways that funds of knowledge transact with historical events as well as current and future events. This body of research also opens the view of practices as dynamic, emergent, and interactional. With this study, I also documented the dynamic, emergent, and interactional nature of literacy practices within the community of migrant farmworkers as I came to recognize that the literacy practices of the families varied, reflecting their migrant statuses, gained over time.

A focus on language and literacy practices within these studies affirms that unschooled as well as schooled Mexican migrants engage in a variety of literacy practices in Spanish and English—practices that Farr describes as “inconspicuously embedded in daily activities” (2010, pg. 63). These practices include reading and writing religious texts, food packages, personal letters, newspapers, and official documents. The data collected for this study mirror these findings.

**Language and Literacy as Sociocultural Practice**

Researchers have documented rich and varied language and literacy traditions that all children participate in, including children with linguistic and cultural minority status who are often thought of as deficient in language and literacy experiences (see Duff & Hornberger, 2008, for a review). Research shows that the language with which children are socialized to become competent members of their com-
Community and competent users of their particular language is imbued with specific sociocultural markers—general beliefs, values, and norms, as well as specific beliefs and practices related to children’s development.

Literacy engagement also reflects sociocultural variation (e.g., Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Heath, 1983; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Whatever children learn about print before they enter school is shaped by the literacy traditions in their community (Purcell-Gates, 2000) as well as by the demands of their daily lives. As children engage in reading and writing routines, they begin to learn concepts about print and the nature of the print-speech mapping that is used for written texts (Purcell-Gates, 1986). Children take this knowledge with them when they begin formal instruction in school. They make sense of their school instruction based on what types of literacy understandings and knowledge they bring to it (Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991).

Unfortunately, we have yet to acknowledge and incorporate these basic findings from the research literature into mainstream thinking and educational practices. Instead, the absence of such socioculturally marked parenting practices as parent-child book-sharing is often interpreted as evidence of a low-literacy home. The child is then often labeled as at-risk for reading problems, despite the rich language and literacy traditions of families in which book-reading may not be commonplace (Baquedano-López & Kattan, 2007) or may be accomplished in nontraditional ways.

Bridging Home and School Literacy Practices

Interest in bridging the gap between home and school literacy practices has led to several research studies on how this can be accomplished (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Some approaches call for “matching” home and school practices (e.g., Au, 1980). Others argue for identifying points of leverage—ways in which school literacy can build on the literacy skills and knowledge that children acquire from everyday interactions (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Gagne, & Jang, 2009; Lee, 1993). The “cultural modeling” tradition (Lee, 1995, 2001; Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008) has been deployed with older students, but holds promise for young learners as well.

Tackling the need to theorize literacy instruction that moves beyond the monologic, socially dominant stance taken by educational institutions, Gutiérrez and colleagues proposed the “third space” theory of instruction (2011; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999). This model addresses the different, and seemingly exclusive, social worlds of marginalized students and the classroom. These two social spaces conceptually encompass such sociocultural dimensions as status, language, literacies, and power relations. As a proposed solution to bridge these two worlds, Gutiérrez visualized what she termed a third space where true dialogic learning, in a Bakhtinian sense of dialogic (Bakhtin, 1986), could take place (Gutiérrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995). Within this third space, teachers would bring their dominant model of instruction and students would feel welcome to bring their varied stores of background knowledge, understandings and readings.
of their worlds, their languages (discourses and participant structures of interaction), and their literacies.

Approaches to instruction that connect informal skills to mainstream lessons in schools may be especially relevant for young children from homes where languages other than English are spoken (Moll et al., 1992). The basic premise involves the recruiting of sociocultural practices as strengths, building from language and literacy used in the daily lives of children to bridge their understanding of oral and written conventions taught in formal educational environments.

The present study is based on my belief, informed by the theory and research just described, that our understanding of children’s literacy development, including the instruction we provide them, must derive from a systematic and real attempt to uncover the multiple and diverse language and literacy practices familiar to individual children.

**Method**

**Study Design**

I designed and conducted this study as an ethnographic case study investigating the phenomenon of social and linguistic marginalization (see Purcell-Gates, 1995, 2007 for other studies focusing on marginalization and schooling). The boundaries of this case (Yin, 1994) of marginalization are drawn around a community of migrant farmworker families with young children enrolled in a Migrant Head Start (MHS) program in the northern Midwest of the United States. I identified and located this community through personal and professional interactions with students and program directors at a university in the same state, where I was a professor of Language and Literacy in the College of Education.

**Research Focus**

My focus within this ethnographic design was on the ways that literacy mediated the lives of the migrant farmworker families. This would provide insight into the values, beliefs, and early literacy concepts held by the preschool children who were attending a MHS program. MHS devoted a significant part of its curriculum to early literacy learning. Thus, another purpose of this study was to uncover the assumptions held by the teachers and staff about the children’s early literacy knowledge, as well as the presuppositions inherent in the curriculum about how literacy is best learned in a preschool program. Ultimately, I hoped to examine the degree to which the literacy learning assumptions of the preschool program were and were not built upon the literacy knowledge, values, and beliefs held by the children, and to then begin to think about how the curriculum could be altered to better reflect the literacy lives of the children.

**Entry Procedures**

I initiated access to this community by requesting an introduction by my graduate student informant to the Migrant Head Start director at the program site. Following this introduction, I made an appointment by phone with the director
for a meeting. I began this meeting by repeating my positioning: a researcher and educator who had heard about Migrant Head Start and wanted to understand it in greater depth. After some explanation of the program, the director mentioned a need for volunteers in the program. I immediately volunteered to help out in any way. The director assigned me as a Level 3 classroom aide. This was the lowest level in terms of influence on the program and instruction. My duties were to mop out the bathrooms, help serve and clean up the food, set up cots for nap-time, and help in any other way I could during classroom activities and outside play. Because I spoke Spanish, I was also available to help translate whenever the native-Spanish-speaking aide was unavailable. In addition to these duties, I volunteered to ride the buses as an extra adult and to be available to all aspects of the program on an as-needed basis (e.g., in the kitchen, in the toddler room, during parent meetings, and so on). My primary focus was the preschool classes, given my interest in early literacy development and preschool instruction, and I began my first summer session in the Preschool 1 classroom, which included children ages three to four.

Participants
The participants in this research belonged to two communities: a) migrant farmworkers on four different farms in the upper Midwestern United States, with a focus on families who sent their young children to the same Migrant Head Start program and on the children who attended the program; and (b) staff and teachers at the MHS program.

Spanish was the native, and in most cases only, language of all of the farmworkers. One family included in the study spoke English as their native language and could get along in Spanish. Another family included grown children who spoke English as a second language. All of the families in the study were of Mexican origin, with extended families in Mexico. US citizenship status could not be reliably determined, with the exception of a few families.

Because I wished to learn as much as I could about migrant farmworkers and the Migrant Head Start program, the number of participants evolved and shifted as the study went along. I collected data from four migrant farmworker camps that varied in size. Over the two summer sessions, I observed more than 100 children in the school, on the school buses, on field trips, in their homes, and during camp activities. I came into contact with about 60 parents (primarily mothers but also fathers): I participated in MHS home visits, observed and/or engaged in conversations at the school, conducted semi-structured interviews at their homes, observed them at the camps (especially when the children were dropped off at the end of the day), and attended the bimonthly parent meetings held in the evenings.

I also interviewed MHS personnel, including eight classroom teachers and aides, spontaneously and on an ongoing basis regarding the operation of the school, their experiences as teachers, and their experiences with the children and families. I also conducted semi-structured interviews and spontaneous conversations with four other MHS personnel who had grown up as children of migrant farmworkers. My informants included the Preschool 1 Level 1 classroom aide, the health coordinator, the family liaison officer, and one of the district MHS supervisors.
The Level 2 classroom aide, Juana (all names are pseudonyms), became my chief informant throughout the course of the study. Because we worked so closely in the classroom—I under her direction—we established a personal relationship that we carried outside through lunch and dinner dates. She was available for spontaneous questions throughout the period of data collection.

**Researcher Location**

I am a white female academic, researcher, and former literacy teacher, and each of these locations placed clear boundaries around me that I was quite aware of during the course of the research process. Program personnel saw me as an academic—someone from the university who was willing to help out and who was focused on learning about the program for academic purposes. The only participant who had a deeper understanding of what I was doing was Juana, with whom I spent many hours talking and learning about her childhood as a child of migrant workers. Her understanding deepened when I enlisted her as a co-researcher of literacy practices in the families, as this entailed explaining to her what I meant by literacy practices and why all instances of reading and writing (i.e., not only “school” practices like reading novels or writing essays) were important for teaching young children in school. The parents considered me a part of the MHS program, although I was introduced to many of them during the first summer as a “visitor.” The teachers and aides in the classrooms were a mix of Mexican-Americans and white Americans so, as a part of this program, I seemed to fit in. Finally, the children saw me as a particularly friendly aide in the MHS program who liked to play with them and occasionally ask them about what they were doing. When I appeared at their doors in the camps or by chance in the supermarket aisle, most of them responded with delighted surprise and rushed to share greetings and show me around or to their parents.

My color, language, education, and status as a member of the US educational system clearly placed me in a position of power greater than that felt by the families, and I did what I could to diminish this through my body language, acts of deference when entering homes, and so forth. However, I did bring to this study an insider’s knowledge of the life of a farmworker. I grew up on a small family farm and spent summers working in the strawberry fields of large commercial farms, doing the stooping and picking of fruit that I saw the farmworkers doing as I observed them for this study. I gave the little money I earned (25 cents for a flat of berries) to my grandmother to help support the family. I later learned as the study evolved that my childhood spent in summer farmwork was an example of a phase of status change (seasonal farm work with permanent residence) that brought with it new literacy practices for the migrant farmworkers in this study.

I concur with Lahman (2008) that the adult-researcher/child relationship is complex, resulting always in a form of “othering” the child. Lahman points out that researchers must be aware of how their own memories of childhood will intensify the othering. My childhood growing up in poverty in rural America made me vulnerable to viewing the children’s lives on the farms in a more positive light than others might have or than they did, themselves. In other words, I remember
those years fondly, especially the access to outdoor play-worlds. To counter this, I spent a great deal of time with the children, attending particularly to their interpretations of their camp lives, and assumed a reflexive stance in my analysis of the data, acknowledging the power of my memories of childhood (Lahman, 2008).

Data Collection
First Summer (2003)
Migrant Head Start sessions in this state were offered from the middle of June through August, when the families were present for the planting and harvest seasons. I devoted the first summer of my work to exploring and learning about how Migrant Head Start worked. I also began learning about migrant farm work, the lives of the families, and the ways that the young children negotiated the boundaries and distances between home and school.

I worked as an aide an average of two days a week, arriving at 9 a.m. and usually leaving at about 5:30 p.m., depending on whether or not I had been assigned to ride the buses that returned the children to their homes each day. During the days that I volunteered, I focused on my role as an aide. I made notes on what I was learning during break times or immediately after I finished the day.

During this first summer, I also arranged for several interviews with three adults associated with the program who had grown up in families of migrant farmworkers in the same geographical location. I conducted the fourth such interview (see “Participants,” above) during the second session. My goal for these open-ended interviews was to elicit a description of what life was like through the eyes of a young child living the life of migrant farm work, including remembered literacy practices, and the reflections of the adults who had successfully transitioned to non-farm work.

During this first summer, I also accompanied teachers and the family liaison on home visits both to recruit families and to obtain the developmental information and observations that are required by Head Start. During these visits, I was solely an observer and was introduced as such. I generally sat in one place in the home while the visiting program staff conducted their interviews. During these times, I was learning about the Head Start home-visit procedures and looking around for evidence of textual use in the homes. Again, I wrote notes from memory as soon as the visits ended, often writing in the car as we travelled back to the center or to another camp. I also paid attention to the discussions of staff members in the cars to and from the camps. These discussions revolved around the program and what they knew about individual families from previous summers.

Finally, during the first summer, I attended all parent meetings at the school and participated as a helper. I helped sort donated used clothing and record it for the “in-kind” record, organize and serve the food, set up chairs, and clean up afterwards. I recorded what I had learned before I left for my return trip home. I also collected as artifacts all of the printed materials that were handed out to the parents.

By the end of the first summer, I felt that I had a good understanding of the Migrant Head Start program and of the families that availed themselves of its ser-
vices. I had a debriefing with the director and requested a return to the program the following summer, this time as a researcher. My research during the second summer was to be with the families in their camps and homes and would involve semi-structured interviews designed to elicit information on their textual lives. I also wished to spend more time in the classrooms observing the instruction and the children, writing field notes at the same time. The director agreed to this and presented it to the teachers for approval when the second summer session began.

Second Summer (2004)
During the second summer, I focused on the Preschool 2 class so that I could follow the children I knew from the Preschool 1 class the summer before. The children were now four and five years old. I observed in the classroom two to three times per week for eight weeks. I also continued riding the buses, accompanying staff on home visits, and attending and helping with parent meetings.

During the first parent meeting of the second summer, I addressed the parents, explained my project, and told them that Juana and I would be calling on some of them at their homes, assuming they returned the necessary permission forms, to conduct the Literacy Practices Home Interview. Following this, I answered questions and several of the parents completed the permission forms at the meeting. Other permission forms followed, either sent in with children or handed to us personally as we appeared for home visits or on the buses.

Classroom Observations
In order to document the language and literacy instruction in the Preschool 2 class, I positioned myself at one of the tables or walked around the classroom, visiting with children and teachers. I wrote notes on a legal pad attached to a clipboard. Few children asked about my writing, but for those who did, I followed Dyson’s procedures (Dyson, 2003), replying that I was doing my work. None of the children asked what my writing “said.” Toward the end of the session, several girls came up to me on the playground and asked to use my paper and pencil to “write their names.” Because most of the children already were familiar with me and used to seeing me in the classroom, they tended to ignore me or treat me as a classroom aide (e.g., requests for bathroom help, asking for more juice during snack time, and so on). They also expected me, from time to time, to engage in activities with them, such as reading a book on request or helping with puzzles. The teachers followed suit, ignoring me or treating me as a classroom aide. It was a very comfortable and relaxed researcher/researchee situation, and I felt like an insider during this second session, having earned my spurs during the first summer.

Documenting Children’s Early Literacy Knowledge
During the time that I spent in the classrooms, I also made conscious efforts to tap the emergent literacy knowledge of the children, using primarily a “kidwatching” approach (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). I observed and recorded children’s attention to and use of print in their environment. For example, the Preschool 2 teacher would take attendance by silently holding up a child’s name card and
asking the child named on the card to take it and put it in the attendance chart slot (i.e., expecting the child to read his/her name). Some children recognized their names by looking at the print on the card, others paid close attention to the teacher’s gaze and where she was looking while wagging the card, and others were simply lost in thought and the teacher would hand them their cards so that the activity could proceed.

During the classroom observations, I made every effort not to affect the instruction or programming but rather to work inside of it, documenting it and participating as part of it. I never suggested to the teachers that I did not agree with parts of it and never attempted to “teach” the teachers and aides new instructional procedures. However, toward the end of the summer session, I stepped out of this stance once to work with an individual student in an attempt to help her more deeply explore print through writing and reading. I can only explain this as an “I just couldn’t help myself” moment. I will describe this further in the Results section.

Home Literacy Practice Interviews
Juana and I conducted six representatively sampled home literacy practice interviews during the second summer. I conducted one of these alone, Juana conducted four interviews alone, and the two of us conducted the fifth one together. The interview protocol used was the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study Home Literacy Practice Interview (Purcell-Gates, 2007), translated into Spanish. The protocol has since been used with over 300 people worldwide who have participated in a variety of case studies of literacy practice in homes and communities (see www.cpls.educ.ubc.ca). The interview is done face-to-face, and is usually conducted in the homes of the participants. The purpose of the interview is to elicit a full picture of literacy as it mediates the life of the participant. We constructed the questions to help the participant recall as many literacy practices as possible. We do this by asking about reading and writing events that are connected with life activity domains (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Wertsch, 1998). For example, the researcher will ask something like, “Can you tell me what kinds of things you read and write as part of shopping [work, entertainment, and so on]? For example, do you write a list? Do you read the aisle signs? Can you tell me about that?” And so on. To increase validity, we conduct the interviews in the homes of participants, where they can focus on the use of written texts outside of a school-type literacy mindset and, also, show us the texts they report reading and writing that would be available in the home. Each interview takes about an hour. We gave each participant in this study a $15 gift certificate to the local Wal-Mart as a thank-you at completion of the interview.

Community Observations: Town
During both summer sessions, I recorded observations of the small town within which the Migrant Head Start program was situated. During the second summer session, I booked a room at a local motel for three days each week, from which I visited the MHS program, shopped for groceries, and ate in local restaurants. I focused on the areas that were visited by the farmworker families, relying on informants from the MHS program and on my own observations for locations of these
areas. I bought groceries in the Mexican grocery store, where I occasionally ran into families and children that I knew from the program. I recorded physical and impressionistic descriptions of these locales each night. I also noted the instances of written texts that the migrant farmworker families would encounter and use.

Community Observations: Camps
The children travelled to this small town each school day from home communities located on individual farms. I made concerted efforts to get to know each camp, observing how each was constructed, the different social spaces embedded in each, and what can best be described as the “tone” or social feel of each camp. I used several entry points to learn about the different camps. As mentioned above, I accompanied the MHS staff on camp visits, both to sign up students and to conduct home visits for purposes of documenting child development milestones (such as “Can X catch a ball?”) as required by Head Start. From this entry point, I could learn about how the camp looked and operated as a social unit from both outside individual homes and inside. I also rode the buses to and from the MHS base two to three times a week during both sessions. I made observations from the windows of the bus, took photos, and sat and chatted with individual children as they made the journey to and from the MHS program, leaving and greeting parents. Finally, I conducted the literacy practice interviews described above, during which I had opportunities to again see each camp and to observe more closely the workings of individual families within their residences in the camp.

I triangulated the interview data with my personal observations in the camps and in the homes of the students, my observations of literacy in the Mexican community in the town, and my observations of the early literacy development of the children in their Preschool 2 classroom.

Finally, I loaded each field note, interview transcript, and photograph into the qualitative data analysis program Atlas.ti for further coding and initial analysis. Atlas.ti is a qualitative data analysis software program that allows coding, search and retrieval, database management, memoing, data-linking, matrix-building, network displays, and theory-building.

Analysis
My analysis of the data evolved over time. The literacy practice data were coded within Atlas.ti according to the protocol used for other studies that comprised the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (see Purcell-Gates, Perry, & Briseño [2011] for a close description of this procedure). I coded each instance of reading and writing observed or reported with identification codes such as participant, age, and so on; and b) literacy event type codes such as text read or written, social purpose for reading/writing the text, social activity domain within which the literacy event type occurred, and function of the reading/writing. It is important to note that the procedures for using the literacy practice interviews do not allow for frequency counts of types of literacy events in the lives of participants or their communities. The goal is to provide a representative sweep of literacy in use for individuals within different communities.
Following this coding, I coded for emerging themes in the data related to my guiding questions and research foci, basing the analysis in grounded theory, where explanations of phenomena are grounded in data provided by participants (Fassinger, 2005). Coding procedures consisted of open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2000; LaRossa, 2005). I created meta-matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to compare literacy practices in the homes and communities with those of the MHS program. I wrote analytic memos as I worked and related these to the data. I also took care to look for “disconfirming evidence” in the data before drawing final conclusions. This often led to new insights that were followed up with further data analysis. The following interpretations are based on these data collection, management, and analytic methods.

**Results/Interpretations**

My goal for this study was to discover the sources of the young children’s early literacy knowledge by learning about the ways that literacy mediated the lives of their families and their communities. This intent is embedded within a theoretical frame that views literacy as situated within multiple contexts of social life. While this frame is one of literacy and literacy development within sociocultural contexts, it does not assume a monolithic, essentialized notion of culture. Rather, it acknowledges that individuals’ behaviors, languages, and literacy practices are situated within social contexts that reflect individual life histories and trajectories that themselves unfold within broader cultural patterns that evolve and change over time and in response to changes in circumstances, locations, and so on. Thus, this study of literacy practice among migrant farmworkers of Mexican origin in the United States who sent their preschool children to a Migrant Head Start program was also one of variation and change over time and in response to life circumstances.

**Social Worlds of Children at Home**

Families from four different camps, on four different farms, sent their children to the Migrant Head Start program. Each of the camps was unique, and the tone and looks of each differed. Despite this, many themes arose of similarity regarding camp life, the migratory life, and the literacy practices that mediated the lives of the migrant families. The following portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), based on the data, reflects common themes of the social worlds of the children and the ways that literacy practice (in the form of textual evidence) mediated those worlds:

It is 7 p.m. and the camps are bustling with adults and children, with men, women, and teenagers newly showered after returning from the fields (it’s pickle time and the push is on to finish the fields, which means early starts and late returns home). The outdoor areas are areas of community with adults and young people fresh from showers after a full day in the hot fields: Men lean back on chairs, sharing cold drinks and keeping an eye on young ones. Toddlers stumble from adult to adult, young children ride tricycles and bicycles or play ball games, teenagers huddle together and share talk and secrets.
Infants are jostled and handed around to different family members. The sun is lower in the sky, but the heat and humidity remain.

Behind the cabins are a variety of trucks and automobiles. These vehicles move the families from farm to farm during the harvesting seasons. Most of the families in the camps share the same migratory pattern: winters are spent in either Texas or Florida and summers in Michigan, and then on to Washington and Oregon.

Inside the cabins, women go about distributing food to children and men. The small cabins are filled with food packages, boxes of juice drinks, bags of chips, cartons of cereal, dried milk, cheese, large cans of beans, and so on—much donated by townspeople. The floors are stacked with the packages where adults and children eat their meals. Televisions play in the midst of the activity, surrounded by men and children who are eating, drinking, or just relaxing. The TV shows are often in English, as well as the advertisements with their logos and printed announcements. Few of the adults and none of the children speak English, and they discuss the TV content in Spanish.

Each cabin is divided by blankets or stacked boxes into a central room with a kitchen and one bedroom for parents. In the central room, there are beds pushed against the walls for the children (who sleep two or three to a bed) and sleeping bags for sleeping on the floor. Several families, usually all members of the same extended family, share one cabin. Single men sleep in a separate section of the camp, sharing rooms in a type of dormitory. Most homes have calendars on the walls with notations, and religious depictions of saints and the Virgin on refrigerators or cabinets. Tables usually hold at least one candle with a picture of a saint and a religious text on the surface of the glass candleholder.

Large cardboard boxes hold the family’s clothing. These boxes can be loaded as-is into trucks or cars when it is time to move on to another farm.

Aside from clothing and a bed, the parents’ bedroom holds the important texts for the families: vaccination records and other documents needed for social services and the MHS program; work papers; occasionally Bibles. Maintaining connections with family is an important literacy practice. For those who do not have post office boxes, mail is delivered to the camps via a large camp mailbox from which farm managers distribute it. Most families eagerly await word from family members and spend time writing back. Some farmworkers also own cell phones and family connections are increasingly maintained through phone calls, using calling cards available at all of the stores visited by the migrant workers.

**Literacy Practices Embedded in the Lives of the Families**

The young children at the Migrant Head Start program experienced a range of literacy practices in their home communities, as do most children (Purcell-Gates, 1996). My analysis revealed that reading and writing mediated 16 different social activity domains in the camps. Each of these activity domains had already been identified in other studies and defined for the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study analysis protocol. Table 1 lists these domains of social activity, along with their definitions and examples from the current study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Activity Domain</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples of Literacy Events within this Domain</th>
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| Responding to Civic Rules and Regulations     | Social activity that centers around responding to bureaucratic requirements | Reading/signing consent forms for MHS activities  
Reading vaccination records to enroll children in MHS program  
Reading/filling in forms to apply for food stamps |
| Participating in Community Life               | Social activity that centers around life in community, defined by participants | Writing sentences as part of an out-of-school class organized by a migrant farmworker volunteer  
Reading forms at the clinic in Spanish for a migrant farmworker  
Writing regulatory signs for a camp of which you are a migrant farmworker manager |
| Entertaining Oneself; Having Fun              | Social activity that centers around things people do for fun               | Reading comic books to relax  
Reading the Bible to relax at night  
Reading video labels to select one to watch |
| Cooking/Eating                                | Social activity that centers around the preparation and/or consumption of food | Reading labels in grocery story to select food  
Reading package labels to prepare a meal  
Writing a list of groceries for husband |
| Participating in Family Life                  | Social activity that centers around the relational life of a group of people who are considered 'family' by the participants | Writing notes to school to excuse absence  
Reading notices from school  
Reading children's homework requirements |
| Attending to Health and Hygiene               | Social activity that centers around the maintenance of health, physical fitness, and bodily care | Reading prescription medicine information  
Reading and filling in medical intake forms  
Reading and signing permission forms for MHS personnel to take children to clinic to test for TB |
| Acquiring or Disseminating Information/News   | Social activity that centers around keeping up on, disseminating, or commenting on information or news | Reading the local newspapers |
| Relating Interpersonally                      | Social activity that centers around maintaining, establishing, rejecting, or interaction interpersonally with others | Writing and reading letters to/from family members  
Writing banners for birthday celebrations  
Writing and reading birthday cards and congratulation cards |
| Maintenance of Tools and Home Environment     | Social activity that centers around fixing, maintaining, or understanding one's tools and/or one's home environment | Reading flyers for bargains on cleaning supplies  
Reading directions on cleaning products  
Reading labels and signs in stores for comparison shopping |
| Engaging in Self-Motivated Education/Personal Improvement | Social activity that centers around personal self-improvement or out-of-school education/learning | Reading the newspapers to teach oneself English |
| Spirituality                                  | Social activity that centers around worship; maintaining or achieving spirituality | Reading the Bible  
Reading songbooks in church  
Reading religious text on calendars and first communion cards |
| Working                                       | Social activity that centers around activity that one does for a salary    | Reading the rules for living in the camps signs  
Completing paper work for the farm owner |
Over time, I came to understand how migrant farm life complicated the concept of “family literacy.” Literacy practices in this case did not occur within a narrow conceptualization of family or of home. The children in the camps lived in community, with all families mingling and minding children both in the cooler outside spaces but also within the homes. Children, many related through extended family relations, ran in and out of the cabins or trailers after work hours. As Lilia, the MHS health worker, recalled about camp life when she was a child:

It was a community. Everybody took care of us. There was no “We’re going to eat now. Go home.” That type of thing. If we were there, we could eat with them. They made sure everyone went home at night. Everybody was safe at home. It’s like, when we were at home in the camp, we weren’t scared or anything because we knew nothing would happen there. We were home. Somebody was going to take care of us.

This communal nature of camp life, in which individual home lives were embedded, meant that the literacy practices that I observed or were reported were more likely to be experienced by most children in the community than would perhaps be true in other studies of children whose individual homes reflected sturdier barriers between home and community (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 1996).

As Street (1984) and others have stressed, literacy practice is indicated by social practice and does not exist outside of social activity as an independent collection of skills to be injected into social lives. Table 1 reflects this theoretical lens, and it is possible to read down Column 1 (Social Activity Domain) and get a sense of life activity as a migrant farmworker. Since the data collection protocols did not permit frequency counts of different texts, read and written, I cannot comment on which of these social activity domains were predominant. Space restrictions prohibit the development of each of these domains for literacy practice. I will, though, attempt to identify some predominant themes of migrant farm-work life as I came to know it that run across many of the activity domains listed in Table 1.

**A Life of Regulation**

The children in the camps consistently observed and engaged with a type of reading and writing that mediated the lives of all migrant farmworkers—lives of rules and regulations. Lives were enabled and constrained by these rules that were enacted through such texts as green cards, immigration papers, forms, and regulatory signs—posted signs about smoking, drinking, latrine and outdoor shower use, and so on.

The children and parents in the MHS program also were caught up in the heavily bureaucratic world of the Head Start program (a federally funded preschool program for children of poverty in the US) and the overlay of rules and regulations attendant to the Migrant Head Start program. The Migrant Head Start program required parents to fill out forms and to show pay stubs to apply for the program, primarily to establish their poverty status. It required health checks and vaccination forms, both of which required the filling in of forms and the reading of certificates. Parents learned to keep certificates of vaccinations as they moved...
around to prevent the re-vaccination of their children (a common occurrence, according to Lilia, the MHS health worker) whenever they arrived at a new site with new programs and schools.

MHS also required multiple home visits by teachers to collect a wide range of information from the parents about the physical and mental development of the children. Teachers conducted these interviews orally, with the teachers reading from forms provided by Head Start and written in English. A Spanish-speaking MHS aide translated for the parents.

MHS staff would jump from the bus each afternoon to deliver activity reports to parents. A family member was required to sign these reports and return them the following day. Incident reports explaining each incident and the steps that were taken to treat any injury were also common. One day, as I was leaving a camp with several MHS staff, a man ran up to us with such a form requiring his signature. He explained that he could not read it as it was in English, but he thought it concerned a bruise that his young boy had received at school the previous day.

A Life of Relationships
Family relationships were central to the lives of the farmworkers. Many texts mediated these relational lives. Reflecting the transfronterizo (Smith & Murillo, 2012), or transnational (Ceballos, 2012), lives of the farmworkers, letter-writing to maintain bonds with family members across the border was a common literacy practice. Another type of text played a role in family celebrations such as graduation parties, birthday parties, and anniversaries: greeting cards, banners, and writing on cakes and cupcakes were common texts read and written for these events.

Spirituality
As seen in other studies of literacy practice in Mexican-origin transnational communities (e.g., Farr, 2010), religion represented a common domain for literacy. Life circumstances shaped different literacy practices within this domain. With the families located in a migrant camp in the middle of feverish seasonal work that filled all seven days of the week, from dawn to dusk, spiritual literacy practice appeared primarily in artifactual form, such as religious text on candleholders and calendars. These texts were short and often in the form of religious dichos (Farr, 2010, p. 52) or Biblical texts. When asked about reading or writing in the domain of religion, participants reported that during the summer (i.e., when working the farms), they never attended church or took part in religious events. They often, though, told us that they did go to church during the winter in their communities in Texas or Florida. Attending church always involved reading lyrics in hymnals, reading the Bible, and reading other related materials such as announcements or religious educational material.

Change in Literacy Practices Reflects Change in Life Circumstances
Just as culture is not static (Ceballos, 2012; Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Smith & Murillo, 2012), nor are literacy practice patterns. As data collection proceeded, I increasingly noticed differences among the families, especially regarding their lit-
eracy practices. This seemed to be related to how long they stayed in one area, i.e., their degree of geographical permanence. Thus, I conducted a secondary analysis of the text types that were reported and/or observed by me across migratory status categories, and this perspective allowed me access to how the literacy practices of the families changed as their status changed.

I identified three categories of migratory status among the families in this case study: (a) migrant farm work; (b) transitional/ permanent residency with seasonal farm work; and (c) permanent residency with non-farm work. According to my informants, these categories represent the transition that many families eventually make from (a) cyclical migration throughout the year to (b) migration for only part of the year with permanent homes during the rest of the year to (c) permanent residence in one area and permanent work in factories or stores rather than on the farms. Many of the MHS staff had moved through these stages during their lifetimes.

While many of the literacy practices (e.g., letter-writing, receiving and sending greeting cards, reading product labels, and filling in medical information forms) remained constant across the three stages of migratory status, others were dropped or added as life circumstances, responsibilities, and opportunities changed. New textual practices for former migrant workers transitioning into permanent residency with seasonal farm work included reading cookbooks, health information texts, and magazines; taking exams for driver’s licenses; using telephone books; and paying utility bills by writing checks on bank accounts. Permanent residents engaged in non-farm work reported additional textual practices such as writing poetry and filling out insurance forms, as well as reading school curricula as members of committees or as teacher aides.

As I visited homes, I could see and feel the accompaniments of permanent residency. No longer needing to pack up cars and trucks and move every two to three months, families could accumulate books for bookshelves, take out subscriptions for magazines and newspapers, and create accounts with utility companies. Freedom from working in the fields led to more leisure time for activities such as writing poetry. Factory or store employment brought with it health plans with the related texts.

**Social Worlds of Children at School**

Linking the social worlds of the camps and the Migrant Head Start program were the bus journeys to and from school. On average, these trips took about 45 minutes, with the trip to the farthest camp taking a little over an hour. Migrant Head Start differed from Head Start in several ways. First, it took children from six months to five years old. This was in response to the desire to provide safe environments for babies and toddlers, many of whom would otherwise be out in the fields with their parents with the exposure to the sun, dirt, and pesticides that goes with field work. Second, Migrant Head Start only ran during the months that the families were in the area for harvests. The program that is the focus of this study opened in late June and ended in mid- to late August. Finally, the school days at Migrant Head Start began early, at 8:30 a.m., and ended late, at 5:30 p.m., in response to
requests from parents who often worked from sunrise to sundown in the fields. Add on a total of 90 minutes for bus rides, on average, and one can see what a long day this would be for such young children.

As a result of my data collection over two summers, including countless bus rides to and from the camps, I came to understand the concept of “contact zone” that Guerra (1998) and Pratt (1991, cited in Guerra, 1998) suggest for researchers of marginalized communities:

It may help to refer to the communities from which representatives of the different social, cultural, political, economic, and linguistic groups originate as “home fronts” and the arenas where their differences clash, blend, or intermingle as “contact zones.” (p. 3)

Phenomenologically for the children, the bus ride was a daily trip to and from a safe, friendly, and culturally and linguistically comfortable home, through the long miles of farmland, to a bewildering, unfriendly, cold, and linguistically incomprehensible school. This is not to say that the staff and teachers did not work hard to make the children feel comfortable, well-fed, and safe. But for the children, each day’s trip was a move in and out of two different ways of being. At home, the children played in multi-age groups, ensuring that family members were together and that the older children could look after their younger siblings. At school, the children were divided into age groups that left older siblings worried about the welfare of their younger brothers and sisters and young children worried in the absence of their older siblings who should have been their caretakers. At home, everyone spoke Spanish, and living quarters served as bedrooms, dining rooms, and kitchens. Bathrooms were outside latrines with no loud flushes! At school, classrooms were spacious and packed with toys, puzzles, books, and computers, and food was stored out of sight and carefully portioned out at snack and lunchtimes. Toddlers were expected to feed themselves with silverware; older children were expected to remain quiet when adults spoke to them, to eat what was put in front of them, to use the indoor bathrooms, and to pee in the toilets. They were made to sit still (“on your bottoms”) for storybook reading and for circle times. Only a few teacher aides (and the other children) understood them when they spoke, which made communicating and listening to the teacher difficult. As Lilia, a former migrant child herself, told me when I asked about what made school so scary for the children:

The language, definitely. And a lot of the language goes for culture. Our culture, we’re touchy, feely. At least . . . at the community level . . . everything for the child. Where the school, the culture where we’re at, it’s not like that. You know, it’s more like “mind your own business; keep your . . . hands to yourself” . . . and we look at that like there’s something wrong with us. . . . You don’t want to associate with us, you don’t want us to touch you . . . where we’re like, “Come on! Come on over!” It’s really hard to adjust to the two different languages and then the two different cultures. To us, it’s almost like an insult (being told to keep your hands to yourself), like being rude.
Language and Literacy Practices Embedded in the Classrooms

Upon arriving at the school, children were led into the building and funneled into their classrooms for free play before breakfast was served. Infants went to the room with the cribs, toddlers to the toddler room with toys and bookshelves, small round tables and chairs, a diaper changing area, and a bathroom with a miniature toilet and a training seat. Children ages three to four and a half entered the Preschool 1 classroom, and older children through age five proceeded to the Preschool 2 classroom. I focus on the Preschool 2 classroom in this piece.

The Preschool 2 classroom, like all the classrooms, had a large window that faced into the hallway. This window served as a bulletin board for signs such as “Bienvenidos” (“Welcome”) and flyers that listed menus, meeting announcements, and so on. Inside the classroom were tables and chairs, bookshelves, a housekeeping center, and shelves for play items such as blocks, trucks, cars, puzzles, and so on. A writing center ran along part of one wall, with paper, pencils, markers, and crayons. Two computers sat next to this area, loaded with programs deemed appropriate for preschool-aged children. The print environment consisted of information posters for adults, such as the emergency procedures or check-off sheets for tasks like cleaning the toys with bleach, wiping out the bathrooms, and so on. Children’s drawings occupied another wall, on which you could see a few attempts at name-writing consisting of one or two letters, other name attempts consisting of scribbles, and teacher-written names on each piece of art. Posters on the bathroom doors portrayed pictures of white children washing their hands or wiping their nose. Print on these posters was in English: “I wash my hands.” “I wipe my nose.” Over the computers was a preprinted poster sign: “Computer Center.” Similarly, by the bookshelf: “Reading Center.” I counted 26 books, with multiple copies of some. Two books were in Spanish. On the wall next to the bookshelf was a poster sign that read “Helping Hands,” under which was a large piece of construction paper with handwritten column titles: “Job Chart,” “Milk Helper,” “Set Tables,” “Clean Tables,” “Weather Person.” Underneath each title were taped hand shapes, each in a different color and with the name of a child. In this way, the children did not need to read their names; they could recognize their color. Next to the window that looked out to the hall was posted a large piece of paper, hand-printed: “Class Rules: 1. We use walking feet; 2. We listen to each other; 3. Our hands are for helping.” The only label that was written in Spanish was located on the ends of the cubbies: “Compartimientos.” Finally, each cot used for naps was labeled with a child’s first name.

During breakfast, lunch, and snack times, the children sat around tables and shared common serving bowls. The language environment for the children was one in which most of the adults failed to understand them or to engage them in conversation, due to the fact that they did not speak Spanish and only one of the children spoke and understood English. This situation is captured in the following example, from field notes:

One day during lunch, four-year-old Melvin chatted constantly (as he was prone to do) in Spanish, telling stories to all who would listen. As he finished his food, he asked...
for “¿Más plátano?” (“Can I have more bananas?”). The teacher responded, “Are you done? Wipe your face with your hands.” Melvin placidly accepted this incomprehension and incomprehensibility. Then he asked for “más” (“more”) and pointed to the yogurt, which he received. However, when he asked for “galleta” (“cookie”), the teacher asked if he wanted more sprinkles. He remained silent until excused.

The year of the data collection, MHS was responding to increased federal requirements to “teach literacy” to the children (this was the beginning of the increased focus on testing children in preschools on early literacy skills). In Preschool 2 (as well as Preschool 1), this early literacy instruction consisted of a) reading to the children (80%); b) teaching the children to write their names (10%); and c) teaching the children to recognize the letters of the alphabet (10%). Other group activities included art and crafts activities, outdoor play, and free play.

During a visit to Melvin’s mother to conduct the literacy practice interview, Juana and I asked her if she was pleased with the program at the escuelita. She said no, that she wanted Melvin to learn English, his numbers, his colors, and how to write his name. The program was about to close for the summer and Melvin was to enter kindergarten in the fall. Having observed his level of literacy development in the classrooms, Juana and I knew that he had learned only a few stock phrases in English, although he was the most fluent oral language user (in Spanish) at that age that I had ever encountered. He did not know his colors, nor could he write his name beyond a wiggly, tilting M. The majority of the Preschool 2 children reflected this level of literacy development.

A few of the children made further strides in terms of early literacy and language. Cecilia spoke English as a native language, with parents who had moved to permanent resident status although they still lived in a camp, as Cecilia’s father was the camp manager. She appeared to me to be on the brink of early reading and writing and showed interest in listening to stories and in experimenting with the computers. Elio and his brother Pablo belonged to the Gomez family that was building an expanding permanent home on property they had purchased, close to the camps where the parents, uncles, and aunts worked in the fields. The head of this family was the abuela, Señora Gomez, who was committed to the schooling of her grandchildren. No one in the family spoke English, but their home included children’s books in English and Spanish as well as books and religious texts for the adults. Elio and Pablo both enjoyed books at MHS, and I spent significant time reading to Elio from books about trucks, his favorite topic at the time (see Reyes & Azuara, 2008, for discussion of how Mexican immigrant children negotiate and draw on their developing bilingualism and biliteracy in school).

While there are multiple explanatory factors for the slow progress made by Melvin and most of the children, I wish to focus on the lack of congruence between the program and the children in terms of language and literacy instruction. This was my focus for the study, but I acknowledge that issues of migration, levels of family literacy use, and budget constraints for the MHS program, as well as many others, also impacted the children’s literacy development. I will address the gap
between their home literacy experiences and those offered by MHS through a description of a telling example from the data.

**What Is Reading/Writing and Why Do We Do It?**

Storybook reading was the center of literacy instruction in the preschool program. This literacy event followed typical routines: The teacher would gather the children on the rug, “on their bottoms” with their hands “to themselves,” facing her. She would then introduce the book, show and talk about the pictures, and proceed to read, usually with the book upside down and facing the group of children. The following represents a typical storybook reading event, documented in the Preschool 2 classroom:

The book area is a mass of wriggling children. Ana (the Spanish-speaking aide) is trying to read a book (in English) about animals to them. Barbara (the English-speaking aide) is helping, and she literally drags Flora over and makes her sit down. Flora really resists! Linda and Karla are surreptitiously doing puzzles in the puzzle area (while story-reading is going on). Andrea makes a dash to escape but is stopped by Ana and ordered back to the rug. Several boys are lying down and sleeping. Others are making houses out of the books on the bookshelves or putting them on their heads like hats. Ana abandons reading the book. (See Figure 1 for a photo capturing a moment of this event.)

Following afternoon nap that same day, the Preschool 2 children gathered around a long table for an art project. They were to make birthday cards for Ana, whose birthday was that day.
Barbara, standing, explains the project: Each is to make a birthday card for Ana. They can choose the color of construction paper. She demonstrates how to fold it in half. Melvin claps his hands with glee! Each chooses a piece of paper and they are instructed to write their names (as best they can) on it with crayon. There is a stamp pad, and they pass around stamps to make designs on their cards. Linda makes several stamps on hers. Natalia writes her name with a backwards N and an O and an I and then some scribble. Barbara goes around and holds their hands to make the words: “To Ana.” Michael (an English-speaking aide) writes on each card, “Happy Birthday.” Melvin still hasn’t written anything. Cecilia has written her name. Cecilia is the most advanced in her literacy development. She will enter kindergarten in the fall. I know her mother is anxious about her progress. While she and the other children have a great time with the stamps, I move to her side, unable to block the “teacher” in me. After Barbara helps her write, “To Ana,” I point to the “To” and ask her, “What does this say?” Cecilia: “Me.” “No,” I say. “It says ‘To.’” She repeats it after me while pointing to the word. She smiles! Cecilia works for a very long time on her picture of a birthday cake. Then she starts drawing lines, colors, and decorations, and adding stickers. During this activity, I ask her several times what “To” says. Then we go on to “Ana” and “Happy Birthday.” With heavy scaffolding from me, she begins to realize that each word does not say “Cecilia” but can be “figured out” by context and the letters. She is thrilled. The teachers and aides have been noting all of this, and at the end of class ask me how they can provide this more “advanced” literacy instruction for those children who are ready.

All of the children were completely engaged in this activity. The contrast in their behavior and level of engagement between the storybook event and the greeting
card event was stunning. Figure 2 displays their activity at the art table, making Ana a birthday card. The children understood about greeting cards from their lives at home. They knew what they were like and why they were sent and received. They were eager to enter into this socioculturally situated literacy practice (and, in the process, learn about writing and reading).

Discussion
I began this research with the goal of discovering the literacy practices that occur within a community of migrant farmworkers and, thus, discovering the early literacy experiences of the young children within that community. This I did, revealing a wide spectrum of social activity domains of migrant farmworkers that are mediated by literacy events. In the process, I came to know the participants in ways that made them visible to me as individuals. Previous research (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 2007) and theory (Street, 1984) specified that literacy events mediate the lives of different communities and people, differing as those lives differ. With this case study we learned that the migrant farmworker life, through a literacy practice lens, is one of responding to regulations and bureaucracy (see also Cushman, 1999, for the ways that highly regulated lives contextualized the literacies of inner-city residents who found ways to engage rhetorically in those literacies). The farmworker literacies also reflected the life activity domains of maintaining family and community relations, and participating in religious rituals with displays of icons and spiritual verses. We further saw how increasing home permanence was reflected in changed literacy practice, changes that helped the children successfully negotiate the contact zone of school. A literacy-as-social-practice theoretical lens places individual events of reading and writing within value systems of communities. The data and analysis of this case study revealed the deeply held values of hard work, family, and investment in children held by the migrant farmworkers.

The additional goal of this study was to assess the ways that schooling (in this case, preschool programs) recognized, honored, and built upon the cultural and linguistic worlds of the children from migrant farmworker communities. I can conclude that they didn’t.

Gutiérrez and colleagues (Gutiérrez, 2011; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995) argue for teachers of socially, culturally, and linguistically marginalized children to build a “third space” within their classrooms wherein the languages, cultures, and funds of knowledge of the children are as equally represented and respected as those of the teacher and the academic community. Their research has, for the most part, documented how this is not done and ways that it could be. In the case of preschool programming for children of migrant farmworkers, there were so many instances of cross-cultural misses that I could only present the few predominant ones. The discovery of the many hidden literacies, embedded in the hidden lives of the children was one of the strengths of this investigation.

None of the teachers spoke the language of the children. This negated a basic tenet of Head Start—the need to build children’s oral language skills. The parents
complained of this in parent meetings, and the response, that each classroom had a Spanish-speaking aide, was not satisfactory. The aide served to support the teacher and only intervened with Spanish in a few cases to offer quick translations of teacher commands, to lead some finger plays, or to divert the children to maintain control.

The attempts to teach some basic early literacy skills were based on literacy practices that are predominant in Western, educated families. A great deal of time was devoted to the practice of reading storybooks to the children. However, this was a completely unknown practice for these children and it was torturous to watch teachers and children during these events.

All of the “cultural mismatches” between home and school were actually the result of a profound lack of knowledge on the part of the curriculum developers, program directors, and teachers of the lives and activities of the migrant farmworkers, and how they are mediated by literacy practices. When I asked the director and the teachers to share with me what they knew about what people read and wrote in their homes and in the camps, they unanimously told me, “Nothing; they don’t read or write anything.” They attributed this lack of literacy as follows: “They can’t read or write.” “They don’t value reading.” “They don’t have any books or anything else to read.” When I pressed them on whether they had seen any print on calendars or food packages or anything else on their numerous home visits, they drew blanks. Among the staff, only the health aide, the family liaison, the district supervisor, and Juana—all former migrant children—understood and could detail for me how much and what kind of reading and writing was actually done in the homes and camps. This information came as the result of my interviews with them regarding their own lives and literacies when young. None of the teachers or aides (with the exception of Juana, who came to understand about situated literacies from me) came from a migrant background, and thus they drew only on their preconceptions of deficit regarding the farmworker families.

The teachers believed that the migrant farmworkers did not value books (and, thus, literacy). Their evidence for this related to the Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program. This nationwide program provides free books to children of families in poverty, along with parent education focusing primarily on reading to children and some early literacy activities for the children. At MHS, one day per summer was devoted to an RIF program in the form of a fair. The festivities consisted of outdoor games and activities for the children like races, balloons, fun houses, face painting, and so on. Within a gazebo-like structure on the playground, the staff placed prepared small paper bags, each with three children’s books and a handout for parents inside. Many books were in Spanish. The children were to choose their bags to take home. I watched as child after child was dragged into the gazebo to “Pick your books!” before they could continue playing. Most of them just grabbed the closest bag, handed it to the adults to mark with their name, and ran outside to join the fun. Only Cecilia, Elio, and Pablo chose their books early, examining the bags for books they would enjoy.

When teachers visited homes, they would sometimes ask about, or look for, the RIF books—in vain. These books were rarely located, if at all. It was Juana who
explained to me that hauling books around between farms was out of the question for the families. It was all they could do to take the boxes with clothes and their important documents in their cars and trucks that were filled to bursting with adults and children. Not even household tools like mops, irons, brushes, and so on could travel with the families, necessitating obtaining these items (from garage sales or charity giveaways) each time the families reached a new destination. It was ironic that while no one from the white, permanent resident, school staff questioned the migrants’ values relating to home maintenance, they all believed that the failure to keep and accumulate children’s storybooks given out free indicated a lack of value for reading and for children’s education.

I presented the greeting-card-making event as an example of how teachers can build on children’s literacy understandings and experiences from their home communities to teach literacy skills. The children’s familiarity with regulatory signs provided another rich resource for early literacy instruction, given the abundance of regulatory signs in the classrooms. These were never pointed out to the children, though, for purposes of literacy development.

While previous research (Martínez-Roldán, 2003; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Purcell-Gates et al., 2007) has documented the effectiveness of building on real-life literacy practices to advance literacy development in schools, little has been done to research this in the preschool population. The exception is a recent action research study that implemented a family literacy program, with adult literacy instruction and preschool emergent literacy instruction based on familiar, out-of-school literacy practices for immigrant and refugee families (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Lenters, & McTavish, 2012; Purcell-Gates et al., 2012). Results showed that both parents and young children grew in literacy ability beyond what would be expected, and suggested that this growth was due to the aspect of the program built on out-of-school, real-life literacy practices.

With the increased focus in policy circles on beginning literacy instruction in preschool and kindergarten, I suggest that one way to close the achievement gap between children from marginalized communities and those from mainstream communities is to institute efforts to investigate what it is that all children actually bring with them to school in the form of knowledge about literacy—values, beliefs, histories, purposes, and textual genres—and then to begin to build curriculum that provides literacy instruction that makes sense to the children and allows them to engage with literacy on a broader scale in ways that will help them succeed in school and life (Gutiérrez, 2011; Kirkland, 2010).

Literacy-as-social-practice theory includes the positioning of literacy practice within contexts of power. The role of power in this case of migrant farmworker families and children is clear. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) assert that property rights play a major role in understanding the continuing salience of race in US society (and educational achievement): from the beginning of US history, individual rights have always been entangled with property rights, and property rights are deeply involved in inequity. Migrant farmworkers represent a group truly without property rights. Not only do they not own property, but they migrate
among properties owned by others, performing the labor that allows the property owners to succeed. The pernicious effects of racism and economic inequity on the children of migrant farmworkers can be seen through an analysis of the attitudes and beliefs held about them by teachers and educational systems.

Migrant children are seen as suffering from poverty, cultural deprivation, and a lack of home and family opportunities to succeed in school. They are perceived as damaged and empty vessels when they enter the public school systems. This case study may provide one contextually rich portrait that counters these beliefs. It should also offer a glimpse into how damaging it is to the children’s future success in mainstream schools if educators fail to understand the funds of knowledge that all children bring from their homes and communities and the ways that early literacy instruction can build on this knowledge to better prepare the children for success.

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