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# The Participation Framework as a Mediating Tool in Kindergarten Journal Writing Activity

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*Drawing on data collected in an ethnographic study of kindergarten journal writing activity, this article demonstrates how students who are not directly participating in instruction are nevertheless key contributors to the social construction of literacy knowledge. More specifically, this study examines how the participation framework of writing activity constitutes and is constituted by the context for learning to write. Five interconnected roles in the participation framework are identified in the data and presented as a shared indexical context within which children's texts are interactionally negotiated. The author argues for a reconceptualization of classroom language and literacy practices from current dyadic-based participation frameworks to more expanded multi-party participation frameworks that allow for flexible access to the social construction of literacy knowledge. By changing the ways in which students participate in school-based literacy practices, students will be socialized to more democratic access to participation in classrooms and in the larger society. This reconceptualization of classroom language and literacy practices attempts to disrupt monolithic definitions of literacy as a reified set of "neutral" skills by challenging the sanctity of dyadic interaction in literacy activity.*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ways in which the participation framework (Duranti, in preparation; Goffman, 1974, 1981; Goodwin, M., 1990; Philips, 1983) mediates learning to write among novice writers in kindergarten. More specifically, I argue that, through analysis of the participation framework as a structure that organizes and is organized by talk (Goffman, 1981) in writing activity, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the central role that overhearers play in the profoundly social process of learning to write.

The data presented are representative samples from a larger data set collected over the course of an academic year in a Los Angeles area elementary school. The classroom context for this study is located in a K-5 elementary school in a small community near West Los Angeles. The school serves approximately 600

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students from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. The classroom itself is one of three kindergarten classes at the school. The morning language arts period was observed once a week throughout the academic year. Journal writing activity was videotaped weekly beginning in January. Participant observer field notes were taken during these observations, informal and formal interviews of both the teacher and the students were conducted throughout the study, and children's written products were collected after each observation. (see Larson, 1995a, for a more detailed discussion of the context and methodology used for the larger project).

The writing activity chosen for focused analysis is a dictated journal writing activity that typically occurs immediately following the morning reading time. The teacher, Janet, hands out journals to each student and directs them to one of two large tables available for journal writing. Janet has designed her role in this activity to serve as scribe for students' daily journal entries and, as students gain in writing competence over the course of the school year, she gradually decreases this role, handing over responsibility for writing to the students. She has implicit and explicit norms that regulate interaction in this writing activity that, over time, become a normative structure through which the children are socialized to accepted practices of participation. The resulting participation framework constituted the linguistic context for learning in this particular writing activity (Larson, 1995a, 1995b).

Drawing on cultural-historical and sociocultural theories of learning (Cole, 1985; Gutierrez, 1992, 1993; Langer, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Moll, 1990; Rogoff, 1990, 1994; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and theories of language socialization and discourse analysis (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Fairclough, 1992; Goodwin, M., 1990; Ochs, 1988, 1992; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), the larger study examines how context, interaction and discourse both reflect and create the social processes involved in learning to write. Research questions focus, generally, on how literacy knowledge is distributed and appropriated in writing activity. Specifically, the project focused on the following research questions:

1. How is literacy knowledge distributed and appropriated through talk and interaction in kindergarten journal writing activity?
2. What is the nature of the participation framework in this journal writing activity and how is it constructed over time?
   - 2.1 What particular conditions and forms of interaction within the participation framework constitute the context within which the social distribution of literacy knowledge occurs?
   - 2.2 What is the role of the participation framework in this knowledge distribution process?
3. What participant roles, in particular, are created as children talk during writing activity and how do these emerging roles contribute to the socially mediated process of learning to write?

In this paper, I will focus primarily on the participation framework and what participant roles are created in the course of interaction and how these roles mediate learning to write.

The examination of participant roles is made possible through micro-analysis of the connection between knowledge distribution and shifts in *footing* (Goffman, 1981), or participant roles, within the participation framework of the activity. Five mutually constituted roles have been identified in the participation framework: teacher/scribe; primary author; pivot (Goffman, 1981); peripheral respondent; and overhearer (Larson, 1995b). I argue that it is through these changing roles that both teacher and students create a spontaneous process of literacy knowledge distribution that results in socially shared and distributed learning. This paper focuses specifically on the role of overhearer. In the following discussion, I will briefly describe the five roles that emerge in the participation framework, then will elaborate more specifically on the role of overhearer as active participant in the social construction of literacy knowledge.

## AVAILABLE ROLES IN THE PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK

In the role of teacher/scribe, the teacher is available for each student author as they finish drawing their story and express to her that they are ready for her to write with them. As scribe, she writes their dictated story for them to copy into their journal. The primary author is the student whose dictation the teacher is currently taking. The pairing of the teacher/scribe and the primary author constitutes the primary dyad. As the primary dyad is established, the role of the peripheral participants, such as overhearer, becomes a requisite position in the participation framework. Overhearers are those students who are seated at the journal writing table and who listen in on the talk and interaction as each primary author publicly writes her story (cf. Heritage, 1985). The roles of peripheral respondent and pivot emerge as the interaction evolves and is transformed from primarily dyadic to more multi-party discourse structures. The peripheral respondent role can be filled by one or more students who answer questions posed to the primary author by the teacher from a position outside of the predominantly dyadic interactional space between the teacher/scribe and the primary author. The pivot may emerge from both the peripheral respondent role and from the role of overhearer as knowledge that is placed on the conversational floor is unintentionally brought into further interactions or into written journal entries. These roles are mutually constituted and emerge over time in daily interaction, thereby forming the normative participation framework, or shared indexical ground (Hanks, 1990), of this writing activity. In this way, a common understanding of the meanings, limitations and potential of literacy knowledge is made available to the students through flexible participation frameworks.

## ESTABLISHING THE PRIMARY DYAD

The primary dyad, or teacher/scribe and primary author, serves as the starting point of the emerging participant roles in this activity and begins the dictation process. Students indicate their readiness to dictate their stories in a variety of ways including eye gaze, body position, and direct verbal request for assistance. The primary dyad is established as the teacher identifies a primary author, or student who is ready to dictate her story, then arranges the environment so as to establish a predominantly dyadic interactional space. The teacher moves to position herself next to the author and closes off the physical space by lowering her body and shifting her body position to face the student. These gestures, in combination with verbal statements, orient students' attention to the tools of writing, specifically the journal page itself. The teacher then begins her role as scribe as she writes the story of the primary author on a sentence strip.

This teacher typically indirectly indexes writing instruction by establishing the dictation frame through routinized opening utterances (e.g. "Is anybody ready?"), eye gaze, and gesture (e.g. bending over one student who is currently writing). While only one student at a time, the primary author, receives direct instruction from the teacher, peripheral participants respond to the teacher's indexicals of instruction by taking up complimentary roles such as overhearer, peripheral respondent and pivot. In excerpt one[1] below, the teacher is distributing journals to students while several have begun to draw or write in their journals. She identifies Joseph as the next student ready for dictation, opens the sequence by asking "Are you ready sir," and walks over to where he is sitting and kneels down on the floor next to him.

**Excerpt 1:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | **Are you ready sir** ((*looking at Joseph's journal as she kneels down*)) |
| Joseph: | Yeah ((*looking down at his paper*)) |
| Teacher: | Okay |
| | ((*begins to look through previous pages*)) |
| | (2.1) |
| | You wanna go back and look at some of your other pages, |
| | or do you want to start on this one. |
| | ((*lowers her body, leans in closer to Joseph and looks directly at his face*)) |
| Joseph: | [I'll ( )] |
| | [((*taps pencil on page of journal as he indicates where*)) |
| Student: | [Mrs. Taylor I'm do↑ne] |
| | [((*from off camera*)) |
| Teacher: | Okay |
| | ((*sits up, reaches in front of Joseph for sentence strip*))] |
| | (2.0) |
| Student: | Teacher I'm done |
| | ((*from off camera*)) |
| Teacher: ° | **I'll be with you in a minute°** |
| | ((*looks at student off camera as she brings back the sentence strip*)) |
| | (2.1) |
| | °Okay° |
| | ((*folds elbows on table, lowers body and looks at Joseph*)) |

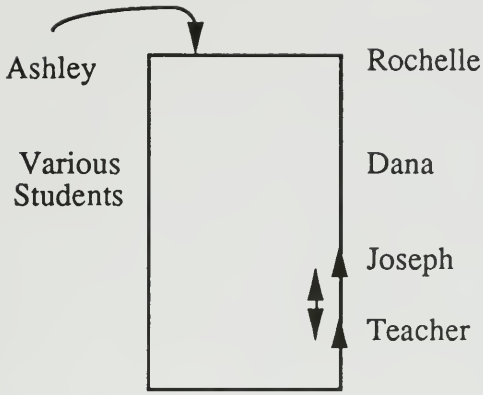

**Figure 1. Establishing the Primary Dyad**

While the above interaction is predominantly dyadic, the dynamic nature of the talk and the overlapping, simultaneous occurrence of all of the participant roles puts the teacher in the position of managing multiple dyads. Students call for her attention, and respond as peripheral respondents and overhearers in the course of the interaction. In order to achieve her goal of finishing all the students' journal entries, she must focus her attention on the primary author while not shutting down the other participants. She accomplishes this goal by shifting her attention to other students in what is termed *dyadic turns* (Larson, 1995b). The teacher briefly shifts her attention from the primary dyad to answer a question, give directions and/or instructions, or talk to another adult. For example, the teacher may maintain a verbal dyad but shift her eye gaze to the peripheral respondent. In addition, the primary author may also direct her eye gaze to the peripheral respondent in a non-verbal triadic participation framework.

In excerpt one above, a dyadic turn occurs towards the end of the interaction and is representative of a verbal response. A student, who is off camera, has twice stated "Teacher I'm done." After the second utterance, the teacher states quietly "I'll be with you in a minute" as she turns to look at the student. She quickly turns to look back at the sentence strip she has brought to complete the journal entry, thereby continuing the flow of interaction with Joseph. This brief shift in attention was found to be a common occurrence as the teacher attempted to manage the variety of overlapping student demands for her attention.

## PERIPHERAL PARTICIPANTS

The talk that occurs between the teacher/scribe and the primary author during journal writing activity takes place in the "visual and auditory range of persons who are not ratified participants and whose access to the encounter, however minimal, is itself perceivable by the official participants" (Goffman, 1981, p. 132). This participation status is referred to here as peripheral participant. To be participate peripherally means to have access to socially mediated learning through increasing involvement in the unfolding interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From the position of peripheral participant, three more refined roles emerge: the role of pivot, the role of peripheral respondent, and the role of overhearer. In other words, the point of reference in interaction moves beyond the notion of a speaker/recipient dyad to a more inclusive model that acknowledges all the participants as actively engaged in the writing activity.

In the role of pivot[2] (see figure 2), a student opens interaction between participants and distributes literacy knowledge from the primary dyad to other activity participants, thereby redefining their status from overhearers to interlocutors and establishing a secondary dyadic frame in relation to the primary dyad.

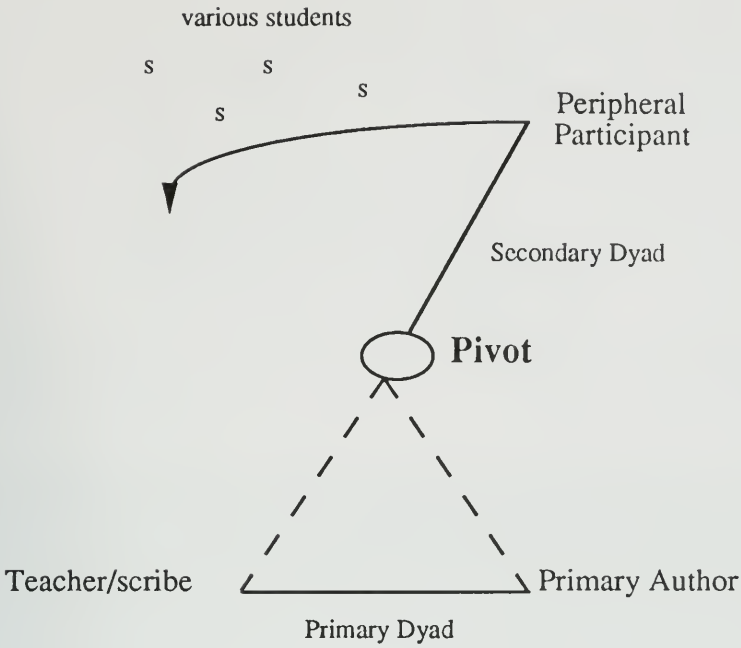


**Figure 2. Pivot**

The pivot expands the nature of the participation structure by expanding opportunities for participation and access to the social construction of literacy knowledge. The role of pivot, in particular, is used as a point of departure for interpretation of the text by overhearers as additional participation frameworks emerge in the activity. In this way, students draw on the talk about text offered by the pivot as a resource for their writing (Larson, 1995a).

In the following excerpt, Hannah has been closely following interaction in the primary dyad and has made numerous attempts to enter into the interaction by responding to questions the teacher has posed to Mary, the primary author. While Hannah remains in the larger activity frame of journal writing, she does not breach the dyadic frame at this point in the interaction. Subsequently, she turns to a student, John, seated across the table and begins a discussion of the letter "B" that she has carried over from listening in on interaction in the primary dyad.

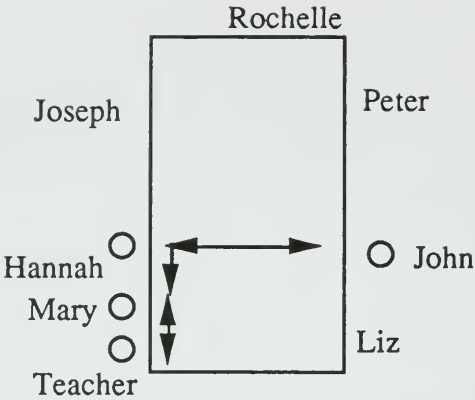

**Figure 3. Pivot as Distributor of Literacy Knowledge**

**Excerpt 2:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | And then bird (.) what letter does that begin with |
| Mary: | Be |
| | ((*looking at the place where the teacher wrote the letter*)) |
| Teacher: | Be- B |
| Hannah: | **B- [be-ber- ber- B** |
| | [((*looks across the table to John*)) |
| John: | [Bu (.) bu (.) balls] |
| | [((*stops writing and looks at Hannah*)) |
| Mary: | [Wants to] |
| | ((*points to her paper as she continues her dictation*)) |
| Hannah: | Ball start with B |
| | ((*looks back to the teacher and Mary*)) |

In this example, Hannah takes the letter "B" from the neighboring dyad (teacher/Mary) and offers it across the table to John, who takes up her utterance by repeating, then elaborating the letter sound. In this conversational move, Hannah establishes the role of pivot as she circulates the appropriated knowledge of the letter "B" to John (Larson, 1995a). This transformation of the participation framework is a critical shift in the interaction. Hannah does not, as in Goffman's (1981) definition of pivot, create a new topic or maintain a separate conversation with John. She functions in two overlapping frameworks but carries information from one predominantly dyadic interaction to another dyadic structure across the table.

A second role, the role of peripheral respondent, emerges from the field of peripheral participants and is created as a student engages in what Goffman (1981) refers to as crossplay, or communication (vocal and non-vocal) between the primary author, the teacher/scribe, and overhearers outside the boundaries of interaction in the primary dyad. The teacher has explicit and implicit rules for gaining the floor and by ignoring what she has determined are inappropriate attempts to gain her attention, she socializes the students to her preferred methods of entry. As peripheral respondents, the students respond to questions posed to the primary author by the teacher. As mentioned, the teacher may actively ignore or tolerate these responses or briefly shift to ratify a response vocally or non-vocally. Over time, the students have been socialized to acceptable behavior during writing and to the appropriate times and methods for gaining access to the teacher. This socialization process creates a normative structure that governs participation in this classroom.

In the following excerpt, the teacher has begun Peter's dictation. She is kneeling on the floor next to him as she writes, while Reid is writing in his journal directly across the table from them. The first sentence of Peter's story is "The daddy was riding on the freeway" and as the teacher finishes sounding out "the", she asks Peter if he can write "daddy." Reid, sitting across the table from them but looking down at his own paper, says the first letter "D" and is subsequently incorporated into the interaction.

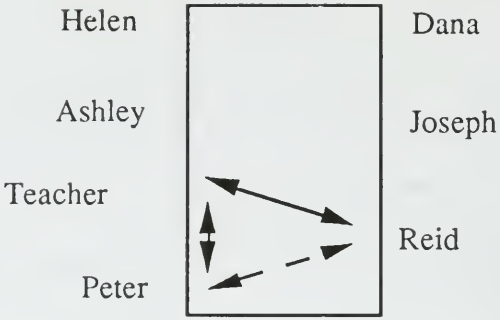

Figure 4. Shifting to Peripheral Respondent

**Excerpt 3:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | Okay T::::H::: |
| | ((*writing the letters on sentence strip*)) |
| | can you write "daddy" |
| | ((*looks at Peter*)) |
| | (2.0) |
| Peter: | Uh "daddy" no |
| | ((*looks at teacher and shakes his head no*)) |
| Teacher: | all right |
| | do you know what it [starts with] |
| | ((*looks at Peter*)) |
| Reid: | ["D"] |
| | [((*sits up and looks across the table at teacher*)) |
| Teacher: | That's right Reid |
| | ((*looks up at Reid and smiles, then back to paper*)) |
| Peter: | ((*looks at Reid*)) |
| Reid: | Because I- |
| | ((*looking at teacher*)) |
| Teacher: | Reid's a good help |
| | he knows all those sounds |
| | ((*looking down while writing*)) |

As Reid offers the correct letter, "D", in response to the teacher's question to Peter, she looks up at Reid and states, "That's right Reid." Reid attempts to elaborate his response with a narrative about how he knows the letter, but is interrupted as the teacher continues, stating "Reid's a good help he knows all those sounds." She looks down at Peter's sentence strip while making this statement, thereby closing off a more expanded triad. Through his utterance in response to a question posed to Peter as primary author, Reid shifts roles and moves from the position of overhearer to the position of peripheral respondent.

As overhearer, then, a student can both deliberately and unintentionally listen in on interaction between the teacher/scribe and the primary author. Overhearers' attention to interaction in the primary dyad can be overtly displayed both vocally and non-vocally and non-displayed, or indirectly indexed, through eye gaze, gesture, and body position (Goodwin, 1981). Furthermore, an overhearer can be sought (Goffman, 1981) as the teacher indirectly, yet intentionally, speaks to all of the participants in the activity through an utterance directed to the primary author. In other words, in addressing the primary author, the teacher addresses the whole group (cf. Heritage, 1985). The normative nature of the participation framework creates, in effect, a shared indexical context (Hanks, 1990) within which participants' use of indirection becomes possible (Larson, 1996a).

Thus, the role of overhearer is characterized by peripheral access to primary interaction and is representative of less than full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From the position of overhearer, sub-sections of talk may be picked up and incorporated into the talk around their texts and may subsequently be incorporated into their stories. It is in this process of picking up knowledge

peripherally that distribution of literacy knowledge and topical diffusion, or the distribution of story topics, can occur (Larson, 1995a).

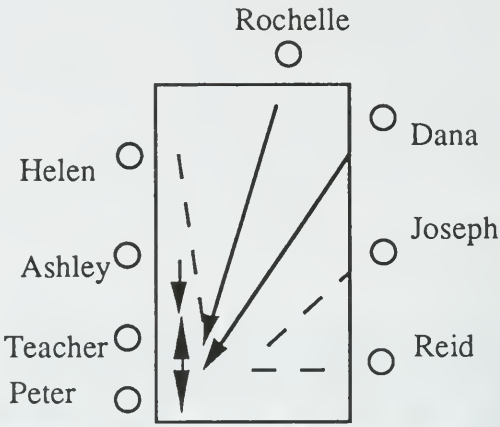

Figure 5. Gaining Access

Primary interlocutor status requires a situated use of the body and an orientation of attention to the tools of accomplishing the journal entry, i.e., the paper, the pencil or crayon, and the written and spoken words. As the above video frame illustrates (see figure 5), overhearers do not have direct access to this embodied process, but are in a position of peripheral access to interaction in the primary dyad in which the socially mediated process of learning to write originates. Consequently, text becomes a community construction that occurs through both direct and peripheral access to primary action. In other words, peripheral participants contribute to the primary author's text in multiple ways and, simultaneously, interaction in the primary dyad contributes to the stories of the peripheral participants. Learning to write, then, is accomplished through the varying and overlapping participation frameworks that emerge in talk and interaction during this writing activity.

Furthermore, the video frame illustrates both displayed and non-displayed attention to the primary dyad. Three students, Ashley, Rochelle and Dana, openly display their attention to the teacher and Peter (the primary dyad) through eye gaze and body position. Ashley has leaned over her writing to look into the primary dyad, while Dana and Rochelle have simply stopped writing and are looking at the interaction from across the table.

## REDEFINING OVERHEARER AS CENTRAL PARTICIPANT

The centrality of participation of peripheral participants, and overhearer in particular, is best illustrated through the case of one student in the focus group, Ashley. Her growth as a writer over the course of the year is representative of how the transition from learning to write as copying to independent writing as storytelling was possible. Ashley began this year, as did most of the children in this classroom, with an emergent understanding of the purposes of written language. In other words, she had knowledge about the purposes of print, knowledge about letters and their associated sounds, had lap reading experience at home, and had begun to experiment with writing before entering school. She is one of a group of about ten students in this class who learned to compose and write their stories independent of the teacher by the end of the year. Her case is particularly relevant to the argument that the role of overhearer in writing activity is an active position from which students appropriate literacy knowledge. While Ashley remained almost exclusively in the role of overhearer during journal writing activity, never shifting to the role of peripheral respondent or pivot in the interaction, she developed independent writing competence.

One day in early April, Ashley wrote her first independently written journal entry as follows:

TH LVBAK WNT TO TH MOM
*The ladybug went to the mom*

This written story indicates that Ashley has not only accomplished the teacher's articulated goal of this particular journal writing activity (i.e. orthographic competence) but also learned to make meaning through the process of creating narrative. Ashley's competence at writing was significantly influenced by her participation as an active overhearer in writing activity as she drew on the public construction of literacy knowledge. In other words, Ashley's written product reflects her individual use of the shared understanding that was jointly constructed in the public interactional space of journal writing activity. For example, on this particular day, the students working with Ashley at the journal table were talking about and composing stories connected to the theme of the month—insects. Some of the students' stories mimicked the book read in literature time that morning (*The Ladybug Went for a Walk*). Other students composed stories that were related to the story content of the book, but still needed the teacher's assistance as scribe when writing text. Ashley, however, not only composed an original story about an insect, but wrote the story herself, without the assistance of the teacher. This represented the first time she did not dictate her story to the teacher.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

I have argued in this paper that the point of reference for learning to write in classroom interaction moves beyond the notion of a speaker/recipient dyad to a more expansive model that acknowledges all the participants in an activity as central to the learning context. Learning to write is not accomplished solely by the individual but occurs both through direct and peripheral participation in joint activity as mediated by the participation framework. Ashley's case illustrates, in particular, how moment-to-moment interaction affects the larger context of literacy instruction by documenting how the teacher and students use the public interactional space as an instructional space within which peripheral participants actively co-participate in the learning process. In other words, students who are commonly considered to be working independently are, in fact, learning and assisting others in ways not previously identified. This study suggests, then, the necessary centrality of all the participants in the mediation of writing activity and the crucial role of peripheral participants in the learning process.

Thus, this study furthers research on classroom interaction by expanding the analytic frame to include participants outside of predominantly dyadic teacher/student interaction as the focus of analysis (Larson, 1995a). There is little research on interaction that occurs between the dyadic teacher/student frame and the simultaneous interactional frame of peripheral participants. This study suggests, then, that the crossplay (Goffman, 1981) between students outside of teacher/student dyads and interaction within the primary dyad contributes

significantly to the process of learning to write. Specifically, this study emphasizes the value of recognizing the consequences of interaction in the primary dyad upon peripheral participants' appropriation of literacy knowledge and, conversely, the consequences of the role of peripheral participants on the construction of literacy knowledge in the primary dyad.

Current dyad-based classroom language and literacy practices commonly position students not as active participants in the social construction of literacy but as passive consumers of a static body of literacy knowledge. Within these classrooms, literacy is defined as a reified set of "neutral" competencies autonomous of social context (Street, 1995). I am arguing for a reconceptualization of classroom language and literacy practices from current dyadic based participation frameworks to more expanded multi-party participation frameworks that allow for flexible access to the social construction of literacy knowledge. Furthermore, I argue that changing the ways in which students participate in school-based literacy practices to allow for more flexible participation frameworks will socialize students to more democratic participation in classrooms and in the larger society (Larson, 1996b). This reconceptualization of classroom language practices attempts to disrupt monolithic definitions of literacy by challenging the sanctity of dyadic (T/S) interaction in classrooms.

## NOTES

[1] The following transcription conventions, adapted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984) are used in the examples given:
Colons denote sound stretch ("The:"); brackets indicate overlapping speech, for example:

J: [Bu (.) bu (.) balls]
M: [Wants to]

Equal signs indicate closely latched speech, or ideas, for example:

T: =e (.) okay=
H: The
T: =what letter does "little" start with do you think

Intervals of silence are timed in tenths of seconds and inserted within parentheses; short, untimed silences are marked by a dash when sound is quickly cut off ("Mrs Tho-") or with a period within parentheses (.) as seen in the above examples. Rising intonation within an utterance is marked with an arrow ("ho↑use"); falling intonation at the end of an utterance is indicated with a period ("okay."). Descriptions of speech or gesture are italicized within double parentheses ("((*points to bird on paper*))"); single parentheses surround items of doubtful transcription; small circles indicate utterances spoken quietly ("°I'll be with you in a minute°"); and **boldface** indicates items of analytic focus.

[2] Portions of the section on pivot appear in Larson (1995a).

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