Cultural Diversity and Discourse Practices in Grade 9.
Lynne Wiltse

Reviewed by	*Miao Sun*
	University of Alberta

This qualitative case study presents an in-depth examination of the "Community of Practice" in a culturally and linguistically diverse grade 9 language arts classroom in an inner-city school in Western Canada. From the community of practice perspective, Wiltse investigates the student-student and student-teacher relationships in this particular junior high classroom. Drawing on sociocultural theory in language and literacy research, Wiltse highlights issues related to the social nature of teaching and learning; describes the intersections of ethnicity, culture, sex, class, and identity in the Communities of Practice; offers pedagogical implications for teachers in increasingly diverse Canadian classrooms; and provides insights for conducting classroom ethnographic research.

Cummins' (1996) argument that "human relationships are at the heart of schooling" (p. 4) is explicitly stated as her research orientation at the beginning of the book. From the social constructivist perspective, Wiltse uses Lave and Wenger's concepts of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation as the guiding principle to examine learning as participation in the social world rather than learning in isolation, and to examine learners' shared membership in the community rather than their individual language-learning situations. Wiltse's theoretical framework on the sociocultural literature also includes Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Vygotsky's and Bakhtin's theories on language and learning, and theories on socially situated identities.

Using ethnographic methods and narrative process, Wiltse focuses on 11 of the students and their teachers in a grade 9 language arts classroom in a multicultural urban school over the course of one school year. The community of practice under study is examined in two main phases. In the first half of the research, Wiltse describes the social practices, discourse practices, and identity practices that emerged in this classroom and explores how these practices had been influenced by the community of practice. She found that the social relations in this classroom both facilitated and constrained the participation of classroom members. Both students' learning and teachers' teaching were shaped by the community of practice. In the second half of the book, Wiltse discusses the changes that occurred when community practices were disrupted in varied ways by group work, newcomers, and a carnival event. On the one side, the study shows that "disrupting the community practices made the established practices more visible" (p. 185). On the other side, the research illustrates that the community of practice was in "continual construction, continual change, continual refinement" (Eckert, 2000, cited on p. 203).

Miao Sun is a first-year doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education, Faculty of Education. She is majoring in language and literacy education.

In her book, which is derived from her award-winning doctoral dissertation, Wiltse outlines her research purposes through a focus on her theoretical, pedagogical, and methodological intentions. I use these three perspectives to discuss the contributions this book makes to wider scholarship and pedagogy.

Theoretical Contribution

As Wiltse points out, the community of practice perspective she uses as her theoretical framework is sometimes limiting in interpreting the data. Therefore, she suggests that her study offers possibilities for improving a community of practice framework in two main aspects. First, although there are studies that use a community of practice framework, and studies that focus on adolescents in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom settings, she claims there are currently no studies that consider both these factors. Wiltse notes, "My research extends the C of P framework by focusing on the specific social, discourse and identity practices in a classroom community of adolescents" (p. 249). Second, based on the findings of the study, Wiltse argues that we need to extend the community of practice framework by incorporating Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding in order to use the community of practice framework more effectively in conducting classroom research.

Another interesting and unique feature of this study is that the usual social arrangements in Canadian society are inverted in the community of practice of this grade 9 classroom. According to Wiltse, much of the literature on race and racism that she reviewed focuses on Black/White relations, and such studies were conducted in a context where the students of majority culture in school are also members of the external dominant society. In the context of this study, however, the majority of the students are of Asian heritage, and there is no Black/White relation. Because the "customary majority/minority cultures were inverted" (p. 71) in this classroom, the *minority* becomes the *majority*; the white students are marginal to the community of practice, and they feel like the outsiders of the classroom community. Therefore, the study conducted in this nontypical classroom setting extends our understanding of a community of practice framework because it is "beyond the paradigms of Black/White race relations and majority/minority cultures" (Pon, 2000, cited on p. 71).

Pedagogical Contribution

From Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem," Wiltse borrows the expressions of light in the cracks and uses them as the metaphors throughout her study. The oral discourse practices in this grade 9 classroom are described by Emily (the language arts teacher in the study) as "getting these students to talk was like pulling teeth" (p. 88). This like-pulling-teeth issue is originally considered as one of the cracks in the study, and later brings Wiltse valuable research insights and helps her offer significant pedagogical implications. Wiltse discusses why Emily rarely initiated classroom discussion in her teaching although she claimed that she was interested in classroom dialogue and enjoyed teaching through dialogue. The study findings demonstrate that both students' learning and teachers' practice can be shaped by the community of practice. The role of the teacher in disrupting classroom practices that limit students' participation is also explored. Wiltse argues for "finding a middle ground, where students and teacher scripts could meet and merge" (p. 253) in classroom practice and

constructing this "dialogue in the third space" by providing appropriate scaffolding to the students. Wiltse also suggests incorporating "hybrid literacy practices" in multilingual contexts.

By examining the complex intersections of ethnicity, culture, sex, class, identity, language background, and patterns of scholastic underachievement in the communities of practice in this grade 9 classroom, Wiltse contributes to the discussion of "why children from some minority groups fail in school at a disproportionate rate as compared to children from the 'mainstream,' middle-class white culture" (Gee, 1992, p. 255). This discussion is of particular importance for teachers and researchers in increasingly diverse Canadian schools.

Methodological Contribution
The author discusses some of the challenges in conducting classroom ethnographic research. One of the methodological implications Wiltse offers is "living with the cracks." Wiltse uses the word *crack* to describe the limitations in the study, and in demonstrating her research process, she explains how she begins with being frustrated by the cracks, then makes efforts to fix these cracks, then accepts the cracks, becomes fascinated by some cracks, and gains insights from discovering light in the cracks. The following quotes illustrate the process that Wiltse went through to "live with the cracks."

"Rather, there was very little student-teacher dialogue and almost no teacher-whole class discussion … At the time, I consider this absence be one more 'crack' in my already flawed research project" (p. 92). "At this point of my research, still very concerned about the 'cracks' within my research, I was looking for something to miraculously 'fix' my flawed research project" (p. 214). "I came to realize, though, that in order to let the light in, it is necessary to have new ideas" (p. 231). "When I let go of the original conception for what my study 'should' accomplish, I realized that much light had seeped through the cracks" (p. 54). "I let go of my unrealistic vision of the perfect research project long ago. I actually found myself embracing imperfection. I looked for and discovered light in the cracks. I learned an incredible amount" (p. 239).

As a graduate student in the process of learning how to conduct educational research, I found myself learning a great deal from Wiltse's research experience, especially from how she considers the limitations and imperfections of her research study, makes adjustment, and uses these limitations to discover valuable insights for her research. I agree with Wiltse that "making the process explicit could be of value to others" (p. 265). Wiltse helps me understand Ely et al.'s statement "the process is the product" (1997, cited on p. 265) and Halliday's (2002) argument that the process might be even more productive than the product.

> It cannot be entirely clear whether the publication of a paper enables or disables productive dialogue. Nor can it be clear whether the process of research is more productive than the production of a research report or set of principles or not engaging in research at all. (p. 55)

Wiltse claims that one unsolved crack in the study is that the research she conducted was not collaborative, and thus "there was no direct benefit for the teacher and students" (p. 242). For various reasons Wiltse could not conduct collaborative research with the classroom teacher. Had the study been con-

ducted collaboratively with the classroom teacher as co-participant and co-constructor rather than "object of research" (Gutierrez & Larson 1994, pp. 241-242), I believe that even more valuable pedagogical implications would have been discovered and more direct benefits would have been brought to this grade 9 language arts classroom.

As an insider of Asian culture, I am amazed by the significant amount of Asian cultural interpretation Wiltse provides in her study. Some of the interpretations are relevant to my own cultural understanding. In this study most of the students are of Asian heritage, and the issue of ethnicity / culture influences almost every aspect of the research. As a cultural outsider, Wiltse made great efforts to interpret the data related to cultural influence, including recursive interviews with students and teachers, talking with the cultural insiders, and consulting and revisiting the literature. I am impressed by the careful observation and analysis Wiltse conducted in this research. She did not ignore any minor information emerging from the data, and most of the minor information turned out to be important points in this research. Several times Wiltse expresses a similar feeling: "Perhaps I am splitting hairs, but I think this may be worth mentioning" (p. 70). I gained many valuable insights from reading this book into how to conduct qualitative ethnographic research in classroom settings.

Rather than offering the absolute truth, the study leads the reader through the complex research process that Wiltse completed and provides valuable insights into understanding the community of practice in classroom teaching and learning. I believe that Wiltse's book is useful and relevant for graduate students, teachers, and researchers. It is a great example of ethnographic research conducted in a classroom setting. It makes significant contributions to the study of social interaction in our increasingly diverse Canadian classrooms.

Reference

Halliday, J. (2002). Research values in education. *British Education Research Journal, 28*(1), 49-62.