Tagging is not simply an act of vandalism or violence; it is a social practice with its own rules and codes—a literacy practice imbued with intent and meaning.

With a marker and paint can stuffed into their pockets, taggers spend part of every day writing on the fences, freeway overpasses, walls, and doors of Los Angeles, California, where more than 7.8 million dollars are spent each year to clean up graffiti (Liu, 2004). Yet we know little about the teen authors who passionately create these highly visible texts. One problem with our understanding is that there is some basic confusion: by whom, the purposes for, and the meaning underlying the practice of tagging as a literacy act.

Taggers are not gang members. Gang members mark their territory by writing the name of their gang, tend to be more physically violent, and break the law for a variety of purposes, while taggers—whose loose affiliation with other taggers is known as a crew—tend to write their names and their crews’, tend to be less violent, and limit stealing to spray paint cans (Phillips, 1999). Tagging is a social practice. Tagging has its own rules and codes, it is a literacy practice imbued with intent and meaning (Aguilar, 2000). Alphabetic style, colors, and lettering script are of high value in this particular segment of youth culture (Miller, 2002). While often viewed as merely graphics, tagging functions as a “language—not just as a generic sign system” (Bushnell, in Phillips, p. 41).

Most people would agree the defacing of public property is highly problematic. But unfortunately, in vilifying the practice of tagging, society too easily overlooks its evolving symbol system (Moje, 2000; Phillips, 1999) and the complexities of the phenomenon (Halsey & Young, 2002). The public’s misunderstanding is particularly relevant for Mexican American teens from working-class backgrounds because of their historical academic underachievement (Darder, 1997; Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Pérez & de la Rosa Salazar, 1997) and their long-time presence as taggers and gang members in Los Angeles. Taggers, often poor teens of color from marginal neighborhoods (Miller, 2002), deserve closer examination (Cowan, 2004; Mahiri, 2004). Youths, in general, are a segment of the population whose ability to use literacy tools to navigate their complex social world is underaddressed in literacy research (Moje, 2002a, 2002b). However, by giving attention to this unique population, educational researchers can gain insight on the youth literacy practices that shape individuals as they are simultaneously being shaped by them (Alvermann, 1998). This insight will help educators integrate these practices with academic goals that will increase their chances for access and success. The purpose of this study is to examine the literate practices of young adult Mexican American taggers.
Theoretical framework

In the last 25 years, literacy research has increasingly shifted from an individual cognitive approach to a social approach, with the view of literacy shifting from one in which discrete skills are acquired in logical sequence to literacy as situated in particular times and places (Barton, 2000; Street, 2001). These evolving literacy perspectives include an understanding of multiple literacies (Street), recognition of varying Discourses and their specific values, beliefs, and attitudes (Gee, 1997), and a conception of literacy practices as textually mediated activities within everyday life (Barton). Furthermore, we can examine the ways specific groups of people use literacy as a resource for sustaining social relationships (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). To help situate tagging as a literacy practice, we will first address the notion of literacy as a social practice. Included is a perspective on how learning occurs within a particular community of practice. Following that, we present research into adolescents’ alternative literacy.

Social literacy practices and community of practice

A social literacy practice refers to the “general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in particular situations” (Barton, 2001, p. 96). According to Gee (2000), local situated literacies are valuable because they provide illumination into the complex webs of actors, words, deeds, beliefs, and values comprising and constituting them (see also Barton, 2000; New London Group, 1996). By engaging in socially relevant literacy practices, adolescents apprentice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to a particular way of behaving, talking, acting, and thinking (Gee, 1997). Lave and Wenger’s notion of legitimate peripheral participation views learning as an interdependent connection between the individual, activity, and social world. This relationship is characterized as a community of practice in which the individuals’ ongoing conflicts, shared meanings, and motivations constitute one dimension.

A literacy practice is sustained through social work aimed at achieving multiple purposes and goals; that is, they are embedded in broader contexts, purposes, and meaning (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1999). Within a literacy practice are specific literacy events that are the visible episodes of individuals’ experiences mediated through text. An illustrative example of this notion is when an individual looks through the pages of a high school yearbook in which the reading of messages and notes from old friends (literacy event) is integral to the broader outcome of connecting with others by sharing memories (literacy practice). (For more examples see Barton & Hamilton.) By examining the everyday literacy practices in different domains of life (e.g., home, school, and workplace), researchers and educators can gain insight on their distinctive characteristics (Barton, 2001).

In the school domain, literacy practices typically are organized around formal structures such as school curriculum, publishers’ textbooks, course exams, and teacher guides. In contrast, everyday literacy practices, Barton and Hamilton (2000) claimed, “are structured by the more informal expectations and pressures of the home or peer group” (p. 9; see also Heath, 1983; Monkman, MacGillivray, & Leyva, 2003).

Tagging, a practice engaged in by youths and young adults who often live in low-income communities of color, can be conceived of as a local literacy practice and as an avenue into the construction of youth identity and group affiliation. Within the public spaces of low-socioeconomic Latino “barrios” or neighborhoods, it is not unusual to see the work of taggers, graffiti writers, and graffiti artists (Aguilar, 2000; Miller, 2002). In these environments, the interweaving of Spanish and English reflects the expectation that participants are bilingual. Taggers often associate with groups of peers known as “crews” but a few work individually as “oners.” There are clear social norms and requirements (Lave & Wenger, 1991) for what is meant to be a tagger.
Adolescent literacy practices

Research into adolescent literacy practices informs our work with taggers. Literacy and language practices, particularly nonmainstream practices, contribute to one’s construction of identity and representation (Ferdman, 1990; Ivanič, 1998; Moje, 2002a; Street, 2001). Literate behaviors of youth are often an indication of their recognition of societal power structures and youth’s attempt to exercise their agency within such structures (Mahiri, 2004). However, the nonmainstream literacy practices of tagging are often devalued and negatively perceived by mainstream society (Ferrell, 1995; Halsey & Young, 2002; Moje, 2000; Phillips, 1999; Weinstein, 2002). Yet, tagging has been positively regarded as an alternative social system in which youths find a space not available to them in the mainstream (Ferrell), an integration of self into public social spaces (Halsey & Young), and a meaningful literacy practice (Aguilar, 2000).

In schools, when students are practicing their tagging and graffiti writing, educators are often quick to assume a gang-related association (Cowan, 2004). Studies in school settings of youths’ personal literacy yield insight on its persistence and purpose. Teachers Weinstein (2002) and Camitta (1993) examined self-motivated literacies and vernacular writing, respectively, with high school students. Weinstein detailed the purposes of tagging for one youth. Camitta studied ongoing personal literacy practices such as inscribing slam books, writing in journals, and composing raps. She found these literacy outlets served as places where students defined individual identity and established community. They also served as a form of communication. Moje (2000) in her three-year study with “gangstas,” seventh-grade students affiliated with gangs, examined what constituted alternative literacies and the outcomes of youths’ participation. She concluded youth alternative literacies, of which tagging was an unsanctioned form, were tools that were transformative, communicative, and expressive.

These perspectives of social literacy practices, communities of practices, and alternative literacies enable us to reconsider these youths’ acts and give us insight on youth culture and its continual fascination with hip-hop culture (Chalfant & Silver, 1983/2004). Mahiri (2004) contended that some youth subcultures are in danger of becoming a “lost generation” unless social scientists develop greater understanding of their interests. Moje (2002a) suggested an awareness of youths’ literacy interests is gained by exploring the many ways they use text to “navigate, synthesize, and hybridize multiple spaces” (p. 115). Mexican American young adults, for this study, offer perspectives that deepen the understanding of tagging in their community.

Methods and data collection

We met our initial participant while the first author was working in the downtown “skid row” area of Los Angeles. Oscar, an 18-year-old Mexican American, was spending time at a religious-based after-school program in order to reduce his court-mandated community service hours as a result of being arrested for tagging. After building a friendly relationship with him and learning more about his underlying interest in tagging, we asked to conduct a series of formal open-ended and semistructured interviews. Due to the illegal nature of tagging, when we expanded our study, we focused on interviewing only participants who were at least 18 years old about their past tagging practices. The participants were from Los Angeles and surrounding neighborhoods populated primarily by Mexican Americans. During the one-year study, we also attended a local art festival and talked with community organizers about the lifestyles of taggers and graffiti artists. Through these neighborhood events, we met other pivotal informants who were also of Mexican descent. These tagger “insiders” included the following participants: an 18-year-old male tagger, a practicing male “oner” (works without a crew), an 18-year-old female tagger,
and a 24-year-old male former tagger. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. We have also provided versions of their subculture monikers trying, in our own way, to preserve their street meaning.

We met on several different occasions with Oscar at times, visiting important tagging sites in his community such as the Los Angeles River, neighborhood streets and alleyways, and local parks. Whether driving the streets or walking along the concrete walls lining the L.A. riverbed, Oscar was able to point out different tags, provide background information on various writers, and discuss each tag's content, style, and local meaning.

There were a total of nine formal interviews in which we (the authors) participated. The number of interviews with each participant varied due to their availability and willingness, as well as our need to further develop our understandings. All initial one- to two-hour semistructured interviews focused on childhood writing practices, school literacy experiences, and current tagging practices. We also had questions about links between tagging and their school literacy, but none identified any link. Two sample tags were shown to participants for their interpretation and meaning. Later interviews followed up with issues such as the reaction of school, parents, and friends to tagging; tagging norms; and clarification of insider terms. With one exception, all interviews were audiotaped and professionally transcribed. One participant chose not to be audiotaped, seemingly for fear of possible repercussions. In this case, one of us asked most of the questions during the interview while the other took detailed notes. The notes were typed up within 24 hours and passed to the other for additions and corrections.

Data collection included field notes, transcripts, reflective notes written after trips in the field or interviews, photographs of taggers’ work, and artifacts from their individual writing notebooks. Due to issues of confidentiality, we do not include examples of tags written by any of the participants. We include several photographs from our field site visit to the riverbed of the Los Angeles River to illustrate textual features. In addition, we viewed documentaries of taggers (Chalfant & Silver, 1983/2004) and graffiti artists (e.g., Tartan, 1974, 1981), visited several websites (e.g., Bojorquez, n.d.; SABER, 2004), and read books on the art of tagging and graffiti (e.g., Miller, 2002; Phillips, 1999; Sutherland, 2004) to become familiar with the subculture’s terms and practices. Also, we decided to include the artwork and segments of an interview with SABER, a recognized tagger in the Los Angeles community (SABER & Tyke, 2005). His voice offers the perspective of a mature tagger with 15 years’ experience.

We read and reread the data and then analyzed the transcripts, field notes, and documents for the meaning and significance of tagging to participants. Then based on our first analysis, we specifically examined the taggers’ perspectives of tagging, and the meaning underlying the practice of tagging as a literate act. Artifacts were examined for content and style. We discussed our findings with two of the participants. They broadened our perspectives from considering surface aspects such as stylistic features into thinking more deeply about the purposes of tagging and interpretations made by others within the subculture.

**Tagging as hip hop**

Understanding the origins of tagging aids its interpretation. Simply put, tagging is a type of graffiti that originated in New York City in the 1980s at the time that the youth culture was experimenting with rap music and break dancing (Chalfant & Silver, 1983/2004; Phillips, 1999) as a “need to express shared urban experiences” (Miller, 2002, p. 5). Tagging similarly is conceived as youths’ way of expressing themselves mediated by text (Barton, 2001). The practice has been imported by youths on both a national and transnational scale (Ferrell, 1995; Halsey & Young, 2002; Miller, 2002). As mentioned, taggers typically belong to a loosely affiliated group known as a crew; it is not unusual for a tagger to be in more than one crew, as one participant, Oscar said, “It’s OK
to be in two crews as long as...you represent them both.”

Tags can be a youth's signature moniker, a slogan, a protest, a message, and occasionally a lengthy tribute. They differ from graffiti in that they always consist of letters in which alphabetic style, use of colors, and crafted script is highly valued. Inventiveness, flexibility, and playfulness with textual spellings and meanings are integral to the tagging community. Rarely recognized by outsiders, highly stylized script, one of the main characteristics of tagging, is often only readable by tagging insiders (see Gross & Gross, 1993). In addition, the stylized script emphasizes the graphic nature of tagging and graffiti, which at times overshadows print features; that is, letters and textual messages. When this occurs it is not unusual for the artist to make a smaller tag in a corner that is a more readable version of the larger and more elaborate tag. As part of a cultural practice, the definitions of these terms among youth are fluid in nature (see Sidebar for glossary).

**Participants' school experiences**

During individual interviews, the youths shared their school literacy experiences and their conceptions of what it meant to be good readers and writers. This background was critical to further analyzing our data. These brief descriptions offer a sense of each participant and indicate that our study participants are similar in many ways to other teens who are not involved in the illegal behavior of tagging.

Maria, the only female participant, cited the type of literature she read for enjoyment. Her favorite books included Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *The Sun Also Rises*; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; and Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. It was not unusual for her to reference her philosophy on writing, which included the assertion that “[conventional] writing is the most form of uncorrupt expression.” Maria, speaking positively of her high school experience in taking advanced

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**TAGGING GLOSSARY**

The following definitions are not fixed but are fluid and changing in the subculture of taggers as well as in regional use.

**Bomb**: a particular type of tag that has puffy letters and is generally done in two colors.

**Call a spot**: when a tagger claims a particular location.

**Crew**: a loose affiliation of members with special purposes (e.g., tagging crew, party crew). It is possible for an individual to belong to multiple crews.

**Graffiti artist**: individual who skillfully uses text, visual images, and color to convey a message.

**Hip hop**: cultural style emanating from New York in the 1970s and 1980s that spawned rap music, hip-hop break dancing, graffiti, and tagging.

**Oner**: individual tagger working on his or her own without any affiliation to a crew.

**Piece (noun)**: short for a “masterpiece” tag.

**Piece (verb)**: the act of tagging.

**Piece book**: a sketchbook collection of taggers’ ongoing work that is circulated among taggers. Generally, tags included in the piece book are for viewing but occasionally a tag can be added to.

**Tag**: a name or brief message written typically with spray paint or paint markers in a highly visible location in the community. Can be on stationery surfaces such as buildings, fences, and curbs. Tags on moveable surfaces such as train cars or public transportation buses achieve greater visibility by traveling to different neighborhoods.

**Tagging**: writing of tags. It is an illegal activity.

**Toy**: novice, inept, unsophisticated tagging. Not well regarded by subculture.

**Scribbling**: unsophisticated tagging.

**Spot in heaven**: tagging on freeway overpass. The danger is rewarded by increased visibility in a prominent location.

**Throws up**: writing a tag.

**Writing**: to tag.
placement (AP) courses, shared her insight on how teachers treated her, an AP student, as special and with academic “privilege.” She currently attends community college and talks of her plans to attend a local, private university in hopes of becoming a lawyer. She expressed embarrassment when she explained almost all of her peers from her AP class were planning to attend a university. She seemed to perceive the privilege and hierarchy inherent in higher education institutions. While she acknowledged herself as “book smart,” she considered her boyfriend, who had belonged to a tagging crew but is currently incarcerated, to be smart “in every other way.” She shared how his perspective broadened her own:

It’s kind of like there’s always a right or wrong. Let’s say someone gets convicted of something and he’s in jail. I just see the wrong that he did, but then again there’s motives behind everything. You don’t know what led him to that place or to that circumstance. [My boyfriend] would always discuss that and make me see that....

She described her neighborhood located on the outskirts of Los Angeles as:

the most dangerous city in the world...[with] gangs around here in the schools and there’s violence everywhere you turn. If you know how to stay away from these kind of things, you’re going to do all right, but there are persons that are weaker than others. That’s just circumstances. And we’re a low-income kind of place.

In contrast to Maria, Rudy dropped out of school, but not because he lacked interest. He stated his infatuation with new knowledge by declaring simply, “I love learning; I don’t like conformity.” He discussed his frustration with his high school instruction in which all subjects were taught in discrete units and measured by arbitrary blocks of time. He lamented this piecemeal approach. “It threw me off, ’cause then we spend our young adulthood trying to figure it out...[life is] not separated by first period, second period.”

When we asked him about his ideas regarding a sample tagging, Rudy approached the task as if reading, scanning the tag from left to right and commenting as he looked at it, “I read this and that.... I’m deciphering for interpretation.” He went on to describe his understanding of the different components as well as the message conveyed by the hip-hop writing.

Although determined to persevere, Oscar had a difficult school experience. By the time he dropped out in 11th grade, he had already attended nine different public schools. As a result of a series of events including being thrown out of school for fighting, clashes with administrators, an extended public transportation bus strike, and waiting for available openings in high school, he cumulatively missed two years from his middle and high school education. Today, he spends weekends working part time at a relative’s pet store and fulfilling community work in order to reduce his court-mandated hours of social service. He’s not able to get a driver’s license until he completes these hours so his mobility is limited, but he talks of buying a car now so he can “fix it up” while he waits. During the week, he attends an alternative school to earn his high school diploma. Although he could get a GED much quicker, he prefers to invest his time in getting a diploma believing that it will increase his chances of becoming a graphic artist. On one occasion, he also mentioned his interest in becoming a bank teller based on the advice of a friend. This declaration reflects his doubt that his tagging talent can really develop into a career. Although the school system—through repeated transfers, insufficient space, and limited course selection—let him down, Oscar still recognizes its value. He encourages his younger siblings to do their homework.

Victor, the self-described graffiti artist, is interested in attending a well-known Midwestern university to pursue his art. He shared how he used to “write stories when I was little” and “loved reading and would read as much as I could,” often persuading his mom to buy books. He described his elementary school experience in
which he was quick to tap into his artistic skill to illustrate the stories as his teacher read aloud. Overall, high school was less engaging, yet he fondly described a high school teacher who would challenge the students. He commented, “The man knew how to teach. He would ask us, ‘What do you think?’ No one ever asked us before. [Teachers] don’t let you think, they tell us what to think.” Yet despite his disappointment with high school, he talked about his reluctance to graduate and leave school because “It’s safe. You’re safe behind the walls.” Victor shared his ambivalence about high school while recognizing the comfort and security it provided him.

These interviews help dispel the common assumptions that taggers are male youths, unmotivated academically, and outsiders in their school environment. Three of the youths were articulate in identifying the limitations of the school setting on their academic learning. They critiqued the constraints of scheduling and the effects of underprepared teachers. Oscar, while not as articulate, clearly had the most difficulty in maintaining a consistent school attendance, yet he stands out for his desire to stay in school when it would have been far easier to drop out. Our talk with Maria, an avid reader and student in advanced placement courses, contrasts markedly with Oscar’s school struggles. Victor and Rudy expressed an intellectual curiosity and appreciation of reading and writing. Overall, these understandings gave us insight on the appeal of street writing for different types of students and the accessibility across genders for participation.

It was interesting for us to find that these youths participated linguistically in two different cultures. Oscar functioned in a Latino community in which Spanish was the primary language. Yet he spoke fluently with us in English. Maria functioned in contrasting worlds of English and Spanish. Her academic life was an English realm; her interactions with her community, her boyfriend, and family were in Spanish. Her tag was a Spanish word.

A social literacy practice

For some youths in a particular community, street writing is an example of how text is incorporated in their everyday lives. In this section, we describe and discuss three aspects of tagging that reflect its nature as a social literacy practice. The youths discussed how tagging helped achieve particular social goals and group affiliations. We named these understandings in three areas:

1. The purpose of tagging to achieve particular social goals and group affiliations
2. The role of talent in tagging
3. The valuing of quantity to achieve status

The purpose of tagging

The various purposes for engaging in tagging all relate to participants placing themselves favorably within a social network of their peers for whom tagging is a valued practice. As part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), taggers are familiar with its norms and procedures. In this social practice, writing and tagging are individual acts in response to the expectations and norms of others (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

One purpose of tagging is to sustain social relationships; it is a form of dialogue and conversation (Ferrell, 1995; Halsey & Young, 2002). This purpose has several nuances. In one sense, tagging has deliberate meaning and intent. For example, Oscar repeatedly wrote a message to his girlfriend on a sidewalk where both she and her father walked by daily. His goal was twofold: to court his girlfriend as well as to annoy her father who disapproved of their relationship. In another instance, Oscar talked of a friend that had scrawled the message, “Where’s Squeaky?” as one tagger’s good-natured attempt to locate another.

On one outing, Oscar pointed out a tag that read “Free Sal” with a date attached. Oscar explained when the named individual was released from “lock up” he would return and “put down [the word] ‘Free’ and just his name.” The tag served
as an open-ended message to the community chronicling his status. Writing an insult next to someone else’s tag can be considered the same as speaking directly to them or even arguing. In one instance, we noticed the Spanish word *jugete* (Spanish for “toy”) written over a tag, as well as obscenities in English and Spanish. Writing over another tag, a way to end a dialogue, is considered offensive. (See Figure 1.) On this same outing, Oscar commented on the obliteration of his work by another tagger and remarked, “He erased me out.” This interpenetration of text and identity captures one of the powers of tagging (Camitta, 1993).

Recently in Los Angeles, there has been a crew that sprays paint from a massive water gun. They go over others’ work with a slash, not expending the effort to substitute an alternative image or even a tag. Oscar described this response as the ultimate offense. Such an interaction can be read as a refusal to even speak the shared language—an assertion that the tagger is not worth speaking to. The significance of tagging in their differential social networks was clear. Other taggers might respect and emulate their work. Or they might write over it. The interplay was apparent and understood by participants.

While most tagging consists of a tagger’s moniker, it is possible to see extended messages for particular purposes such as memorials (Cooper & Sciorra, 2001). One example in this

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**Figure 1**

An example of layering

The written comments surrounding LYRIC, such as *jugete* (Spanish for “toy”), reflect the conversations addressed to the writer as well as other taggers.
East Los Angeles neighborhood is a tag that appears on a four-story apartment building adjacent to a freeway on-ramp. Painted in tall black letters on the exterior wall of the top floor is the tribute, “R.I.P. [Rest in Peace] I will love you forever.” It is likely that this building was chosen as a tagging site because of its high visibility to both the neighbors and rush-hour commuters into the L.A. metropolitan downtown area. Known as memorial walls, this genre of tagging is distinctive from other tags in placement, writing, and context. Tags consist of a tagger’s moniker and stylized writing often readable only to insiders. By contrast, writers of memorial walls place them in highly visible public spaces in the community, highlight the deceased’s name, provide a declaration, proclamation or tribute, and may include poetry or religious scripture. Another unique feature of this tagging genre is that writers will use conventional legible writing because the memorial wall’s purpose is to be shared and read by all in the community (Cooper & Sciorra).

Another purpose of tagging is the desire to “be known” or to achieve fame and recognition within a particular community (Chalfant & Silver, 1983/2004; Miller, 2002). “Being known” includes recognized membership in a crew. This echoes Ferrell’s (1995) assertion that tagging is a “collective experience of youth” (p. 87). Membership can serve as a form of self-preservation because it provides a margin of safety from recruiting efforts by gangs.

Like when you reach [the age of] 18 and you’re still a tagger, and if you’re known, the gangs are going to come up and ask you to go with them. And if you just want to have fun and [do] the writing and be known without tripping [fighting] on anyone. And if you’re a tagger, they leave you alone.

But being known also meant at times pushing the limits of safety, which could have dangerous repercussions. For example, Victor shared a story of a close friend who attempted to tag a “spot in heaven” high on a freeway overpass. The youth was suspended over the side of a freeway by a rope tied around his waist and fell when the rope slipped causing him to break his legs.

Youths use tagging as an avenue to declare membership. As we looked over the downtown skyline one day, Oscar pointed out to a tag that was high on a second-story wall. He explained that it was written by a crew known for their daredevil placements. Because crews are not interested in staking claim to a certain territory, they offer an alternative to “fractured communities and segregated spaces” (Ferrell, 1995, p. 85). One tagger might “throw up” (write) in varied places across a city and even a region, thus introducing a common genre and a shared language crossing the city’s ethnic and socioeconomic enclaves.

These crew affiliations bring responsibilities as well as privileges. Writing allows one to have a larger social network—one not possible in the exclusivity required of gang members. Being a tagger and part of a crew provides a neighborhood niche where youths can seek a potentially safer alternative to gang activity (Phillips, 1999). Crew members can play important roles in one another’s lives.

Another purpose of tagging can be to provide commentary on larger societal issues. In one “piece” (the term is short for “masterpiece”), Victor depicted his critical view toward the recent U.S. bombing of Iraq. He also produced another piece depicting the negative effects of corporate-sponsored deforestation on the environment. Both pieces were placed in highly visible locations allowing his message to reach a wider and more mainstream audience. The well-known graffiti artist SABER shared his view of the power of graffiti and tagging in society, saying, “I see graffiti controlling the corporate realm, I see graffiti making political moves. We’re all going to take our position, and it’s going to be significant; our voice will be heard” (SABER & Tyke, 2005). His tag, spanning over 250 feet along the concrete walls of the Los Angeles River, is prominent in size and well known by taggers. He sells pictures of his illegal art over the Internet (see Figure 2).
For some street writers, tagging is about creating a voice, communicating to those inside and outside one’s community, and creating alliances.

**The role of talent**

While anyone can participate in tagging, it is only those who display talent that are valued in the tagging culture. Oscar asserted that if individuals are not talented, they should not engage in tagging. Quality tagging is more often allowed by other taggers to “call a spot”—to stay up without being written over by other taggers. This ability to maintain a tag without having it written over is a sign of other taggers’ respect. This notion resonates with Camitta’s (1993) description of the powerful role of youths, typically self-appointed “reader/editors,” as arbiters of taste.

Individuals become known for their particular style that distinguishes them from novice taggers who are just beginning to play around. When novices engage in “scribbling,” it is denigrated as “toy” and distinguished from real graffiti. Most of our participants talked with disdain of those who tag poorly and explained that it hurts the reputation of taggers as artists. Echoing their sentiment, SABER also referenced quality:
It’s rare to see somebody that really shocks you or that you are really impressed with. A lot people are kinda scratching their way up to their little top with their little ego, but it’s rare that we see somebody coming through with true heart ready to go full. (SABER & Tyke, 2005)

More than one of our participants noted how the taggers are beginning younger and younger. Oscar started tagging when he was 13 and was known for his early talent, but he said kids start much earlier now. When we asked how he knew which tags were from the younger crews, he pointed to one immediately stating, “That’s a crew of little kids, that’s like sixth and seventh graders.... I started young, but I knew what I was doing, and they’re just doing it.” So there is an assumption among taggers that talent can improve with time and practice. As Victor commented, “You can always get better. It’s all about improving yourself.”

Even though there is great variety in tags, there seems to be a shared sense of what a talented tagger can do. Maria commented, “Those who are talented can depict tagging as being very artistic. There’s a lot of details, a lot of colors, a lot of things to be played with, and those who know how to use it can make something really beautiful. Only those who know how. And then there’s all who just like to play around and try, I guess. It doesn’t have the same effect on anyone else. It’s just different.”

Tagging skills are demonstrated, honed, and replicated through repeated practice. The sharing of elaborate tags is accomplished by circulating sketchbook collections called “piece books” among their peers. The circulation of a tagger’s piece book demonstrates how experienced taggers are interested in sharing their writing and seeking peer feedback in developing their skills. As in apprentice-style learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), novice taggers access piece books as exemplars to learn characteristics of more skilled writing styles and techniques. Piece books are tangible objects that can be temporarily possessed and used as a resource for learning different writing styles. The esteemed and privileged position of these artifacts is exhibited by youths’ handling and safeguarding of them. Even though they are frequently passed around to a number of students at school, they are one of the items brought into a school setting that does not get stolen. Piece books reflect the tagging community’s ability to adopt a genre to include a larger audience and obtain immediate feedback. The way the youth community honors the work of their peers, treating it with admiration and attention refutes the stereotype of taggers as disrespectful and careless.

Talent is also reflected in taggers’ flexibility with words and letters. Taggers are deliberate in how they choose their names. Victor described the practice of consulting a dictionary for potential names. Their goal is to find a name that elicits powerful images, serves as a play on words, or “is rare and has meaning.” For one tagger who uses the name “Price,” he enjoys the play his name receives in mainstream commercial stores and venues (e.g., Prices slashed today!). As a result, he achieves a high degree of recognition instead of having to tag. He remarked proudly, “I’m up everywhere.” Words chosen as names often have multiple meanings and are recognizable in mainstream society. For example, Victor described how one tagger’s moniker “Exit” is simultaneously a word commonly seen in everyday traffic signals but also can pose an existential question. In the tagging community, words can also be manipulated to take on new meaning. (See Figure 3.)

One tagger described the evolution of his moniker. Initially, when he began tagging in his teens, Victor used the name “FULL,” which was an acronym for “finding understanding through learning.” As he became an adult, he reflected on personal growth gained in overcoming limitations. He decided his name could be written the same way but now reflected this mature meaning of “finding understanding through limitations.”

A considerable amount of time and effort is spent finding a name that evokes the correct persona or aura, or reflects a social commentary. Oscar described how he knew one tagger who
chose a name to reflect his science academic abili-
ty and used the first three letters to fashion the
name “Scion.” To create a name, many taggers ex-
plor the use of Spanish and English. Some
ames play with both languages at the same time.
ames of crews are typically written as acronyms
(contrasting with gangs who write out the entire
gang name) and often represent more than one
meaning. All text—words and letters—has mean-
ings that change over time.

Because tagging is a social practice that re-
quires rapid inscription due to its illegal nature,
brevity is a key factor in the selection of a name
(Chalfant & Silver, 1983/2004). As a result, most
taggers will have no more than five letters in their
name. A name with fewer than four letters is con-
sidered “toy” by most and a name too long is un-
wieldy. Some taggers will spell it differently each
time in order to “make the name [your own]. You
don’t want anyone else to have your name.”
Names are private and are only revealed to their
closest friends. When the police began to associ-
ate Oscar with his tag, he made a few subtle
changes so insiders would still be able to recog-
nize him while the police would not. When a tag-
ger’s sophisticated word play and stylistic

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**Figure 3**

*Figura 3: A tagger’s unique moniker that also makes a statement*

The above tag was written by an individual who goes by the subculture nickname IKON. Through a play on words, taggers are able to create a unique moniker and make a statement. Captured in this image is a small related tag written underneath the larger work. These smaller tags often appear adjacent to the primary tag and may contain more legible text, alternate spellings, or stylized letters. In this example, IKON written underneath contains a backward n.
lettering is respected it is often emulated by other taggers.

Tagging can affect social relations (Camitta, 1993) and thus has consequences both within the tagging community and outside it. Maria shared that some individuals with talent will tend to “hide” their writing skill because they don’t have a gang affiliation and do not feel that they have the “same rights” to be able to write because “they’re not claiming anything or promoting” a gang. All of our participants talked about the threat of being caught by teachers, parents, and the police. Oscar’s friend would not let him show us his slam book for fear that we were the police. Still youths were drawn to tagging and the social connection in the community.

The valuing of quantity to achieve status

Quantity, that is, the number of times a tagger “throws up,” “writes,” “pieces,” or “bombs” is a priority in the tagging community. Posting tags, as well as more sophisticated works in multiple locations, is used to achieve fame and recognition. Unlike gangs who focus on establishing territorial boundaries, taggers are more interested in prominence than perimeters. Multiple tags are one way to work for or to promote yourself and your crew. If a tagger is a member in more than one crew (not an option for gang members) it is “getting up”; that is, tagging both crews’ names that allow dual membership. But there is usually a cost to quality if there is only a focus on quantity. Moreover, the desire for recognition drives the push for quantity.

One way taggers have addressed the push for quantity without compromising quality, is through the use of stickers (for other examples, see Ferrell, 1995). Some taggers use white sheets of adhesive paper so they can create colorful detailed tags and then spread them quickly around the community. Metal templates and stencils also allow for a quick tag, but these tend to be used more by gangs to mark their territory. Quantity also has its negative aspects in that a tagger can become obsessed in how and where they begin to tag their name. Maria compared excessive tagging to being an author:

It’s like when a writer writes too many books, the first book he wrote was a really good one, and he takes his time and it has a perfect plot and it has a perfect ending to a perfect story. And then he wants to write a sequel, and it comes out OK too, and then he gets too much success, and by the end of this he writes things that are of no interest to anybody. It’s kind of like that. They [taggers] get an attitude.

Maria is addressing an aspect of quantity typically ignored in schools. She sees the harm of producing quickly and often. The same critique other participants made of schoolwork itself, the demands for fast and frequent production. For example, Rudy echoed this sentiment about quantity as well as placement during his interview. He shared,

Somebody who’s completely self-absorbed with themselves, wants to be egotistical and get up and hit up their name everywhere, on everything, you know, even on a house, even on a car. Then there’s real artists. Then there’s the real graffiti. That’s tagging in my eyes. But it’s all open to interpretation.

Oscar talked about the way the desire to be up all over became an obsession and how this drove him to take greater risks. Once, a sheriff caught him and a friend tagging in the L.A. riverbed. As a vivid demonstration of the property damage Oscar was doing, the sheriff took their paint can and sprayed their tennis shoes and faces. Despite the markings, Oscar was relieved he and his friend were given a warning and released instead of being arrested. For many taggers, the adrenaline rush of tagging in dangerous and illegal ways outweighs the potential costs (Ferrell, 1995). Quantity is one way to achieve recognition. Random and underdeveloped tags earn little respect in the community.
Final thoughts

Taggers tag (literacy event). They throw up a tag, their carefully selected subculture nickname, with the intention of connecting to a particular social community (literacy practice). Street writing is a social literacy practice in which an individual event takes place in response to the social relationships with and the expectations and norms of others (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The manner in which taggers learn the distinctive aspects of tagging is situated in their subculture’s community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This study into the perspectives of Mexican American taggers from low-income neighborhoods offers insights on a typically alienated population and seeks to support educators in reversing their historic academic underachievement (Gibson et al., 2004; Pérez & de la Rosa Salazar, 1997).

Examining tagging through the research lens of a social literacy practice (Barton, 2001; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 2001) revealed the complexity of these youths’ lives and identified some of the meanings underlying the practice. In many ways, taggers are similar to other teens who do not engage in the illegal activity of tagging. Talking with participants dispelled the common assumptions that taggers are typically unmotivated academically and are outsiders in their school environment.

Tagging has clear underlying meaning and purposes. Tagging allowed individuals to shape an identity and belong to a particular community. We came to understand the alternative lifestyle that tagging opened up, such as one way to escape gang membership. Youths exhibited ease with language, including drawing upon their English and Spanish into their everyday literacy practices. Findings in this study highlight tagging’s varying purposes to sustain relationships, carry on dialogue, provide social commentary, and establish an identity by being recognized and known. Becoming known was achieved by the quantity and quality of tags. To be a knowledgeable participant required talent, skill, and competency.

From a view of learning as situated within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we considered the perspectives, orientations, and behaviors acquired by youths engaged in tagging. As competent participants in their subculture, youths learned to collaborate with their peers. They acknowledged and valued peer feedback in becoming more capable and proficient at tagging. Moreover, they honored the work of their peers by treating a circulating tagging piece book with admiration and care. They demonstrated specific talents such as finding originality in selecting a name, persistence in tagging itself, and repeated practice. All of these attributes had a potential payoff of achieving recognition in their neighborhood and beyond. In choosing the nature of their message and deciding on placement, taggers displayed sophisticated decision making which parallels the values of conventional writers. That is, taggers considered audience, context, form, and genre.

We sought an understanding of tagging without sentimentalizing the act. We are aware that law enforcement and schools have attempted to eradicate it. However, legal injunctions or ignoring the practice of tagging has not stopped the youth practice and are insufficient responses (Phillips, 1999). Therefore, it is critical to understand more clearly the meanings behind the symbolic forms of expression used by bilingual and monolingual adolescents and to explore more fully their purposes for their writing. This insight will help educators integrate these practices with academic goals that will increase their chances for access and success.

Educational implications

The practice of tagging raises issues for educators in how they can support young readers and writers by acknowledging and transforming their nonmainstream writing practices without sanctioning them (Moje, 2000; Street, 2001).

Using a social theory of literacy encourages educators to look beyond a dichotomy of school
and nonschool literacy experiences (Hull & Schultz, 2001) and move beyond a language divide of English and Spanish.

Exploring ways to overlap practices of school and everyday local literacy practices is already finding its way into pedagogical practice. Currently, teachers are reshaping curriculum to reach out to those students who may feel alienated by traditional curriculum. Educators, researchers, and preservice teachers are using forms of writing workshop in and after school and across the grades to connect to students’ knowledge, expertise, and experiences (e.g., Blackburn, 2002/2003; Brooke, Coyle, & Walden, 2005; Dyson, 2003a, 2003b). For example, Singer and Hubbard (2002/2003) have found value in “combining academic with experiential and community-based learning” (p. 326) in a high school English class. One assignment is a passion project that allows students to choose without censorship an area of investigation. Students’ interests have ranged from comic strips to illegal drag racing. When educators open up the curriculum using students’ everyday literacy interests as starting points, they can also attend to issues of power, authenticity, and culture embedded in the social practices.

Continuing to examine youths’ everyday literacy practices, including tagging, supports all educators in their quest to involve disenfranchised adolescents and support their academic success. Participants in this study were ambitious and persistent, albeit in different ways. Bilingualism was assumed and not considered a weakness. There was interpenetration between English and Spanish that we rarely see in school. This research can spur educators to lead students in an analysis of their own everyday literacy practices and identify their purposes and the role of bilingualism. Students can then apply this kind of analysis to other literacy events, such as standardized tests or college applications.

Teacher education can be a rich site for exploring the implications of this study. The negative assumptions about Mexican Americans and other youths from diverse backgrounds in general are often a silent partner in the curriculum. A program that offers opportunities for analysis of a variety of youth social practices, links pedagogical practice to literacy research and theoretical perspectives, and provides time for group discussion and reflection can increase future teachers’ understanding of student disenfranchisement.

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