



COMMUNITY-BASED PEDAGOGIES AND LITERACIES IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: PROMISING BEGINNINGS, INTRIGUING CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

What is the role of local knowledge in preparing language teachers in this time of globalized education reforms and standards? How do perceptions of *community* inform teachers' understanding of local? How is the transmigrant reality of the 21st century influencing how we understand and enact community? These are a few of the pressing questions that have emerged from a multi-year collaborative research project involving faculty and students at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (UDFJC) in Bogotá and the University of New Hampshire (UNH), USA. In this essay, I share the background and some of the preliminary insights and subsequent implications from the first stage of our project on community-based pedagogies and literacies, a project that grew out of a shared interest in reclaiming the value of local knowledge in a time of increased standardization, but is now raising complex questions regarding conceptions of community in a transmigrant world.

BACKGROUND

In 2008, while attending a conference in Medellín, Amparo Clavijo-Olarte and I were inspired by two community initiatives we saw in the city: the *megalibraries* project and the “metro culture” campaign. As language teacher educators witnessing a growing disconnect between teachers, students, and curriculum we were wondering how to help our teachers see their urban communities as rich resources for curriculum, and see their students as inhabitants of communities with multiple linguistic and cultural assets. The two Medellín projects reflected a community-as-curriculum philosophy and invited citizens to think differently about their local resources and their roles in creating a culture that valued and supported these resources. How could these projects help us articulate and integrate community-based literacies into our programs? And, how could sharing our work across our differing contexts of Colombia and the USA foster individual and collective learning? This conversation was the beginning of our international collaboration.

**BOGOTÁ AND MANCHESTER:
DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, SHARED
CHALLENGES**

We work with prospective and in-service language teachers serving children and schools in plurilingual urban communities in Colombia and the United States. Amparo is in Bogotá, a city of over 7 million, including the largest immigrant and internally displaced population in the country (Albuja & Ceballos, 2010) and my work is based in Manchester, a small New England city (population 108,000) with a growing immigrant/refugee community. Bogotá's poorest schools are populated with indigenous children whose families have been internally displaced due to armed conflict, crop fumigations in the countryside, and/or natural disasters. Many of these children speak neither Spanish nor English and are now in classrooms where Spanish is the language of instruction. Immigrant children in the US are the fastest growing segment of the public school population and in Manchester, where over 70 languages are spoken in the school district, the local trend mirrors the national reality. The number of children whose first languages are not English has grown over 80% in the last decade while the overall school population has decreased by seven percent.

These changing demographics in our urban centers means that teachers are serving children from backgrounds different from themselves. The majority of Manchester teachers are White, middle-class, monolingual English speakers who live and/or were raised in rural or suburban communities. A prevailing deficit perspective equates *urban* with impoverished and discourages teachers from exploring the neighborhoods surrounding their schools. They have limited or no first-hand knowledge of these communities, and so when they say they aim to *create community* in their classrooms, it typically means importing their values and experiences into the schools.

Complicating or exacerbating the difference in teachers' and students' lived backgrounds and

experiences, are recent education policies that devalue the linguistic/cultural identities of our students and their families. For example, the Colombia Bilingüe policy sets the goal of having a bilingual country by 2019 but defines bilingualism as Spanish and English, thereby devaluing the 80 indigenous languages spoken in the country (Gonzalez, 2007). In the US, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed in 2002 eliminated any references to multilingualism as a national resource and the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) became the Office of English Language Acquisition (Wright, 2005).

The challenges in Bogotá and Manchester reflect the larger current reality in language education where increased standardization and the transmigrant reality of the 21st century —where populations domestically and internationally are in flux— have worked to distance teachers and learners from the curriculum and from each other. The trend of more imposed, scripted curriculum limits teachers' pedagogical autonomy and devalues their professional knowledge (Gonzalez, 2007) as well as the rich cultural, linguistic and sociopolitical funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that students and their families bring to our schools and communities. This disconnect between teachers and students has real consequences on student achievement. In a five-year study on immigrant adolescents in the US, a *relational gap* where students could not identify an adult in their school with whom they had a positive relationship was a noteworthy factor in students' success or failure in school (C. Suárez-Orozco, M. Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008).

The language education profession has recognized these challenges and responded philosophically and methodologically. For example, Canagarajah (2006) argues for the invaluable role of local knowledge in second language curriculum development, writing:

Teachers in different communities have to devise curricula and pedagogies that have local relevance.

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Teaching materials have to accommodate the values and needs of diverse settings, with sufficient complexity granted to local knowledge. Curriculum change cannot involve the top-down imposition of expertise from outside the community but should be a ground up construction taking into account indigenous resources and knowledge, with a sense of partnership between local and outside experts (p. 20).

In 2010, TESOL and the National Council for American Teacher Education (NCATE), the principal accrediting agency of college/university based teacher education programs in the US published standards for ESOL teacher certification. According to these standards, teacher candidates who exceed expectations in the domains of culture and planning, “design classroom activities that enhance the connection between home and school culture and language; [...] act as advocates to support students’ home culture and heritage language” (p. 43); and “use students’ community and family to locate and develop culturally appropriate materials” (p. 55).

In short, there is value and power in helping teachers value the cultural and linguistic assets students bring to the classroom and to connect their curriculum to local communities. However, the challenge is not why do this work but rather how to support teacher learners in initial community investigations, help them see the communities with new lenses, and then how to use this nascent knowledge to inform their curriculum. Initially, we sought to do this through community-based pedagogies and literacies.

COMMUNITY-BASED PEDAGOGIES AND LITERACIES

Community-based pedagogies are curriculum and practices that reflect knowledge and appreciation of the communities in which schools are located and students and their families inhabit. It is an asset-based approach that does not ignore the realities of curriculum standards that teachers must address, but emphasizes local knowledge and resources as starting points for teaching and learning. This perspective is informed by the

work of educators such as Freire (1988), Moll et al. (1992), Murrell (2001), and others. Freire insisted that curriculum be locally generated and generative, inviting learners and their worlds into the project and process. Murrell advocates for the development of “community teachers,” educators who “actively research the knowledge of the cultures represented among the children, families and communities he or she serves[...] as a means of making meaningful connections for and with children and their families” (p. 51). Murrell’s work evokes and expands upon the concept of funds of knowledge, the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133).

Our notion of community-based pedagogies and literacies is also informed by sociocultural approaches that highlight language and literacy as situated, cultural practices that permit participation in social realms (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2004). Between 2009 and 2011 Amparo and I designed and implemented new field-based assignments across a variety of courses from theory and methods, curriculum and assessment, language and literacy research, and teaching práctica and sharing the work between our students. Examples included Amparo’s students in the Advanced Literacy Seminar visiting the megalibraries in Bogotá to explore the array of literacy practices and opportunities available and create new types of community-based assignments for their students and my students creating and teaching community-themed curriculum units in neighborhood centers serving immigrant/refugee families and students (see Sharkey & Clavijo-Olarte, 2012, for more detailed descriptions of assignments). The students at UDFJC about to embark on community investigations near their teaching sites reported that reading the UNH students’ work helped them better understand the purpose and rationale of the assignment.

INITIAL FINDINGS, EMERGING ISSUES

The vast majority of our eighty plus teacher learners over the last three years have reported finding the community-based work valuable for a variety of reasons, from appreciating the creative alternatives to more traditional teacher education types of assignments and changing perspectives on local communities to critical awareness raising regarding the lived worlds of their students and families and the realization that they were privileging their own frames of references over their students when generating examples in their classrooms. For more detailed analysis of student responses see Sharkey and Clavijo-Olarte (forthcoming).

In March of 2012, one of my students reported that the community field trips she designed for an after school unit allowed her to see how students' perspectives and questions generated during visits to such places as an art museum and police station can be the starting places for curriculum. A critical insight for this prospective teacher was that curriculum *can* come from the interaction between students, teachers and experiences; it doesn't have to come from a textbook or in a box of materials from the district office (Sharkey, Girolimon, Meyer, & Proulx, 2012).

It is important to note that the shift from a deficit to asset-based view of students' realities does not mean ignoring the harsh conditions of some of our urban spaces. For example, for her first community investigation assignment Pamela González Ariza, a graduate student at UDFJC and public school teacher in Bogotá, visited the living quarters of a group of Embera children in her school whose families had been displaced from their villages in the Chocó region. Pamela reported that in addition to the trauma of forced internal migration, these children did not speak Spanish and their daily journey to school included navigating extreme high crime areas where prostitution, drug trafficking, and gang violence were omnipresent. Eighteen months later Pamela, still amazed by these children's resilience, is designing the research for her thesis to address how these students'

complex sociopolitical, linguistic, and cultural identities raise critical questions for second language pedagogies (personal communication, February 12, 2012).

However, some of our teacher learners interpreted community in ways we had not anticipated and we need to address as the project proceeds. For example, the majority of UDFJC in-service teachers worked at institutions such as universities, private bilingual schools or city language schools that attracted students from all over the city. They did investigations of the physical, geographic community surrounding their schools even though their students did not necessarily frequent these spaces. One of my students thought he couldn't do a community investigation near the school where he was teaching because he said there were no English learners in that town. He drove an hour away to city with a 83% Latino population. It is not fully clear what assumptions he was working under but it does suggest that he interpreted community as "urban, not-White, non English speaking, poor." Similar to the UDFJC teacher learners, he assumed community had to be a physical space but for him it was a particular kind of space and place.

While migration is not a new phenomenon, advances in technology and increased access to mass transportation has meant that migrants can stay connected virtually, economically, politically, and/or physically to their places/spaces of origin. Thus new models of transmigrants and transnationalism mean a rethinking of migrant identities, including but not limited to expatriot, transmigrant, refugee, and cosmopolitanism (Block, 2006).

The transmigrant reality of our urban centers thus complexifies any notion of community, highlighting how it is intricably connected to notions of identities and how discourses around communities create a range of subject positions that can be empowering or disempowering for their members (Norton, 2000). For example, how do the Embera children and families self-identify? Which communities do they see themselves as

inhabiting? How is claiming a multilingual identity empowering versus a being labeled as a displaced non-Spanish speaking indigenous person of color living in one of the poorest sections of the city? How and where do they assert their cultural and linguistic identities in the city?

We are encouraged by the learning generated by and with students in this first stage of our project but their reflections have spurred important inquiries

into the complexity of the work at hand. If we seek to reclaim the role of local knowledge in teaching and learning we must take up the intricacies involved in working in and with populations in flux. As we resist the imposition of scripted curriculum and testing that is disconnected from teachers and students/families, we must not inadvertently impose a romanticized or superficial concept of community.

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