

Community-Based Pedagogies: Projects and Possibilities in Colombia and the United States

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FINDING CURRICULAR INSPIRATION ON THE METROCABLE

How can we help reclaim the value of local knowledge in teaching and learning in a time of increased testing and standardization? How can we highlight urban communities as rich resources for curriculum with multiple linguistic and cultural assets? These were two of the questions we were pondering while attending a language education conference in Medellín, Colombia. Then, as we were touring the city via the metro and metrocable, two community initiatives caught our attention: the *megalibraries* and the *metro culture* campaign. These two city-funded projects reflected a community-as-curriculum philosophy, inviting citizens to think differently about their local resources and their roles in creating a culture that valued and supported those resources. How might we do the same in our home communities? In this chapter, we share how we are pursuing this question by introducing community-based pedagogies into our teacher education programs.

BOGOTÁ AND MANCHESTER: LINGUISTICALLY RICH URBAN COMMUNITIES FACING SIMILAR CHALLENGES

We work with prospective and inservice 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 and Judy is in Manches-

ter, a small New England city (population 108,000) with a growing immigrant/refugee community. We have witnessed how current education policies have devalued 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.

Bogotá's poorest schools are populated with indigenous children whose families have been internally displaced due to armed conflict and/or crop fumigations in the countryside. Many of these children speak neither Spanish nor English and are now in classrooms where Spanish is the language of instruction. In the U.S., 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 (OBEM-LA) became the Office of English Language Acquisition (Wright, 2005).

As educators, we both see disconnects among teachers, students, and curriculum in our schools. In Bogotá, teachers have more pedagogical autonomy than they realize but they tend to doubt their knowledge and expertise, instead privileging the textbook as authority. In Manchester, a move to more scripted curriculum means neither students nor teachers see themselves or their lives reflected in the textbooks. This shift highlights the demographic imperative (Garcia, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009) of the reality that while the K-12 population has grown increasingly diverse, the teaching population has not.

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.

Responding to these challenges, we began developing ways to bring teachers out into the communities, offer them alternative lenses and tools for documenting resources, and help them make pedagogical connections. In short, emulate Medellín's example: posit the city as curriculum.

COMMUNITY-BASED PEDAGOGIES

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 thoughtful educators such as Freire (1988/1970), Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992), Murrell (2001), and others. Freire insisted that curriculum be locally generated and generative, inviting learners and their worlds into the project and process.

Drawing on the work of Freire, Dewey (1933), and leaders and teachers in and before the Civil Rights movement in the United States, Murrell advocated for the development of *community teachers*, educators who spend quality time in the community where they are going to teach so that they may better serve their students. 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).

PROJECTS AND POSSIBILITIES IN BOGOTÁ AND MANCHESTER

We were inspired by a project in Medellín where the city had opened large libraries in public parks and gave them community-focused agenda. We then learned that Medellín had been influenced by the successful *biblored* or library network project begun in Bogotá in 1998. The city had intentionally located five *megalibraries* in the poorest areas of Bogotá where there was little access to public education and informational resources. One goal was to create a sense of pride and cohesion in the targeted communities. To date, the project has been credited with positively transforming those neighborhoods in numerous ways (McDermott, 2010).

Inspired, Amparo created a new assignment designed to introduce her English language teachers to the *megalibraries* so that they would (a) see the libraries as places where children experienced multiple literacies, (b) associate these poor urban centers with rich resources, and (c) connect the *biblored* to their teaching. The participating teachers were divided into teams, each assigned to visit a different library and each given a set of guiding questions that necessitated interaction with employees and users of the libraries. In a subsequent class, teams presented their findings and shared pedagogical implications.

The guiding questions addressed each library's history, usage, design, resources, programs, and impact on the community. For example,

- How did the library come to be?
- Who funded it?

- Who designed it?
- Who uses the library? (Number of people each day, demographics of users, etc.)
- How does one get access or membership? Is there a cost?
- What types of programs are offered for children? Adolescents? Adults?
- How accessible is the library to people with special needs?
- What types of physical spaces are available?
- What is the nature of the collections?
- What types of electronic resources and audio/visual materials are available?
- What kinds of literacies seem to be promoted here?
- What other services are offered? Are there connections to other city projects?
- What impact has the library had on the surrounding community?

The field visits, class presentations, and reflections indicated that the assignment helped the teachers expand their notions of literacy. They observed children and adults using literacies in multiple ways and for multiple purposes, which helped them see and appreciate assets in the communities—not only the library itself but also the people who used it and their involvement in creating and participating in the events and activities held at the library (e.g., family story-telling, art projects, and meetings on community issues). They saw the numerous possibilities the libraries offer to students as learners and the pedagogical value of libraries for parents as well as teachers. They were then able to create lessons that connected their classrooms to the students' worlds outside of school.

INVESTIGATING THE COMMUNITY IN INNOVATIVE WAYS

Judy has integrated several activities across different courses and experiences to help prospective and inservice teachers shift perspectives from deficit to asset-based and generate curricular connections and possibilities. The activities described here are the neighborhood alphabet; visiting a key community place; and asset mapping.

The neighborhood alphabet assignment is simple, yet remarkably powerful. Participants must find the letters of the alphabet as they appear in objects in a target neighborhood, take pictures, assemble them in alphabetical order, and reflect on the experience. For example, a telephone pole might be the letter "T." Reflection questions include: How did trying to find the alphabet help you see the neighborhood in a new way? How well does the collected alphabet capture the spirit of this neighborhood? Two examples, the Vermont

alphabet and the Bogotá alphabet, were posted on YouTube for models (Sharkey, n.d.a; n.d.b). Two reflections from prospective teachers indicate the transformative power of the experience:

My impressions [of the city] changed, expanded, widened with this assignment. I was amazed . . . how the simple intention of discovering the alphabet requires one to slow down, notice one's surroundings on a deeper level. . . . While walking the neighborhood taking photographs, people looked at me and sometimes asked what I was doing. These moments turned out to be great opportunities to learn more about the people who inhabit the neighborhood. . . . I spoke to several . . . One was a jazz musician who after we started talking agreed to come into the after school program to perform for the students. (Elizabeth Plante, October 2010)

I was a little hesitant to take on this assignment. My impression of the neighborhood was not very positive. I viewed [it] as dirty, dangerous, and high in poverty. I was not sure what types of things I would see or the type of people I would run into. The assignment helped me see the neighborhood in a deeper way. . . . Instead of walking around and feeling scared. . . , I felt intrigued and wanted to see more . . . The best part was seeing one of my students. Wok [pseudonym] was so excited to see me outside of school. He was not the least bit shy (like he is in school) and pointed out where he lived. This was a great feeling. I was touched and happy to see him. He was with a bunch of his friends. Seeing the kids showed me that the neighborhood was warm and inviting and not nearly as scary as I thought. It helped me see the neighborhood in a new light. (Nicole Turner, October 2010)

Another assignment asks participants to identify and then investigate an important place in the community. This may be a restaurant that serves as a meeting place for community events or a grocery store that provides other services including tailoring, money transfer, or tax services. Finding such a key place often requires initial inquiries with community members, students, or their families. The assignment is then to visit the place, describe it, take an inventory of the different products and services offered, and interact with owners, workers, and if possible customers.

Suggested reflection questions include: How does knowing this place and about this place give you a new and/or deeper understanding of the community? What kind of function does this place seem to serve that other places (school, town library) do not provide? What kinds of questions did this investigation raise for you? Why should teachers know about these kinds of community places? How can you incorporate this experience and your learning from the experience into your classroom? As a result of this assignment, teachers see the need to get out into the communities and bring that knowledge into their teaching. Here is one example from an inservice teacher:

I made a greater connection to my kids and their families by spending time at Saigon Asian Market. On my most recent visit, two of my Vietnamese students were there. Duc was shocked to see me and didn't quite know what to say. For some odd reason they couldn't believe that a teacher in their school would shop at the Saigon Asian Market. Duc's parents were happy to see me . . . Mrs. Nguyen wanted to know how he was doing. I reminded her that we had a teacher conference coming up and that I had gotten an interpreter for it. When I relayed my experiences to my colleagues, they were amazed. One . . . complained about how the Vietnamese community didn't appear interested in coming to school activities and community functions at the school. I explained that sometimes we teachers need to go to the mountain before the mountain will come to us. I didn't realize how great a gap there was between their home world and their school world. Perhaps we came a little closer to closing that gap. (Hope Inman, October 2009)

Asset mapping is a technique with rich potential for curriculum development. Urban planners use it to involve community members in development projects, helping them identify resources and articulate projects and action plans (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). At a summer Community Teacher Institute, Judy and colleagues from the University's Community Leadership Program used asset mapping as an integral tool in developing community-based pedagogies. First, the concepts of asset-based approaches to development were introduced and then an asset-mapping framework was presented with five categories: physical spaces, associations, institutions, local economy, and individuals (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

After reading the categories and learning how to use the framework, participants went out into the immediate neighborhood and had 30 minutes to identify resources for each of the five categories. The meeting took place in a community center in one of the poorest sections of the city, yet each pair was amazed at their success with the exercise. Examples included community gardens and playgrounds for physical spaces; the Boys and Girls club and the Greek club for associations; a public library, a bank, a health care clinic, and several churches for institutions; restaurants, neighborhood grocery stores, and auto-repair shops for the local economy; and mothers and children, teenagers with pre-teens, and numerous people speaking several languages for individuals.

Two weeks later, a subsequent asset-mapping exercise in a different neighborhood put participants into teams of four and in one hour they had to identify resources, keeping the categories in mind but free to go beyond them. Then, the teams worked together to create curriculum ideas across multiple subject areas that also met local/state standards, and make class presentations the following week. One of the teams created an iMovie of

their exercise and posted it on YouTube (Sharkey, n.d.c). Another group created a PowerPoint featuring pictures from their walk and teaching activities the photos inspired. Here are two examples.

(1) Subject: Geography.

Visual: A poster in a small grocery store advertising phone rates to different countries in North and South America. The grocery store was in a Hispanic neighborhood and the poster was in Spanish.

Task: Using a map of North and South America, label the countries listed in the phone poster.

(2) Subject: Economics.

Visual: Photograph of a community church with a sign “Believers Christian Outreach.”

Task: Neighborhoods have a formal economy and an informal economy. What does the informal economy of neighbors sharing goods and services look like in your neighborhood (church clothes and food giveaways, watching each other’s kids, sharing extra garden produce, and so on)?

Transformative Examples and Outcomes

The examples above are introductory activities in a longer process of learning how to develop community-based pedagogies. Here, we include an example from a more advanced stage in the process. A public school Spanish teacher in Bogotá, Olga Cicua, developed a literacy unit with her ninth-grade class while participating in a professional development program at *Universidad Distrital*, Bogotá. She expanded the traditional reading and writing activities in her classroom by having students explore cultural places in the city, read the urban languages from the streets, and write about these out-of-school experiences. Along with visiting cultural sites like *El Centro*, *El Museo de Fotografía*, and the *Parque de la Independencia* [The City Center, the Museum of Photography, and Independence Park], the students learned how to read museum exhibitions and enjoy poetry in cultural places like *Casa de Poesía Silva* [The House of Silva Poetry].

The written products from the activity were very rich. One student wrote a poem capturing her experiences walking through the neighborhood of “La Candelaria.” Another wrote “Sitio de Arte” [Place of Art] describing his experience walking the city at night. One student wrote his life history, pieces of which were published in a local newsletter in an article titled “Jóvenes Citaturnos” [Young City Dwellers]. According to the teacher Olga, these activities transformed her teaching and helped her develop new learn-

ing experiences with her students, focusing on urban poetry, theater, urban culture, architectural history, and city development. Consequently, the students began relating to the city in new ways.

LOOKING FORWARD TO NEXT STEPS

We are still in the early stages of what we envision as a multi-year collaborative project. However, we are excited by the changes we have already noted in teachers' attitudes as they made the shift from a deficit to an asset-based view of their students and their families. We are encouraged to see emerging pedagogical projects in schools and communities.

The collaboration has also given us a better understanding of the educational realities and challenges in our different contexts and enhanced our individual and collective conceptions of community and community work. For example, Amparo is intrigued by the possibilities of reaching out to faculty in departments outside of education and applied linguistics for input into designing assignments. Meeting Amparo's students and visiting a public school in Bogotá, where one of them had written about the displaced indigenous children, raised critical questions for how Judy was conceptualizing community in a transmigrant world. Beyond geographical communities, we must consider the notions of ideological, linguistic, cultural, even imagined communities (Benedict, 1991) and these communities coexist, compete, interact, and/or not in the same spaces.

We look forward to the next stage of our project in which we see more teachers moving beyond their initial investigations and explorations to becoming coinvestigators *with* their students. In other words, we look forward to seeing the continued development of community teachers, who as Murrell (2001) stated, "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).

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