PROMOTING THE VALUE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IN ESL/EFL TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED FIELD ASSIGNMENTS

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INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF AN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

A lot can happen on a metrocable ride. For us, it was the source of inspiration for a multi-year, international collaboration to integrate community-based pedagogies into our teacher education programs. While touring Medellín, Colombia after attending a language conference and discussing the challenges of preparing teachers for our increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse schools in a time of intensified standardization, particularly in testing and curriculum, we were inspired by two community initiatives: the megalibraries project and the "metro culture" campaign. These two city funded 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 inform our work as teacher educators? How could we emphasize the importance of local knowledge in language and literacy education so that our students would see their urban communities as rich resources for curriculum, and see their students as inhabitants of communities with multiple linguistic and cultural assets? 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.
Over the next year we began reflecting on what we had already been doing with our students and devising ways to formalize our collaboration, moving from individual activities to designing a multi-year project. The result was outlining a three-stage project with the following guiding questions: What is the role of community knowledge / knowledge of the community in the professional knowledge base? How do we promote knowledge of / in local communities as rich resources for teaching and learning and integrate community-based literacies and pedagogies (CBL/CBP) into language teacher education? How does engaging in CBL/CBP affect teachers' thinking and development in regards to language & literacy? How do teachers bring CBL into their curriculum? And finally, how do CBL/CBP affect students' development of language and literacy? In this paper, we use a critical action research approach to report our efforts to promote and integrate community knowledge into our teacher education programs.

CHALLENGES IN LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Amparo is a professor at the Universidad Distrital (UDFJC) in Bogotá, a city of over seven million where she directs the graduate program in Applied Linguistics in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). She works with English teachers in public and private schools and has also worked with Spanish language arts public school teachers in professional development projects that promote innovative literacy practices. Judy directs the teacher education program at the University of New Hampshire’s urban campus in Manchester, a small city (population 109,000) with a growing immigrant/refugee population where more than 70 languages are spoken in the public schools. In addition to teaching and supervising graduate interns pursuing degrees in elementary education and ESOL she works with teachers on a number of collaborative professional development projects. Though our contexts are very different, our teachers and public school students and families face
similar challenges: the poorest schools are the most culturally and linguistically diverse, there is an over reliance or emphasis on scripted curriculum, and national education policies (e.g., Colombia Bilingüe and in the US, No Child Left Behind) devalue and/or ignore the plurilingual reality of our communities.

Our local challenges reflect the larger current reality in ESL/EFL education where increased standardization and the transmigrant reality of the 21st century 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 et al., 1992) that students and their families bring to our schools and communities. Changing demographics in our urban centers – from immigration and/or domestic migration has meant that more teachers are serving children from backgrounds different from themselves. As a result, many teachers struggle to make connections – personal and pedagogical – to students’ lived experiences and histories.

The profession has recognized these challenges and responded philosophically and methodologically. In the 40th anniversary issue of TESOL Quarterly, Canagarajah (2006) argues for the invaluable role of teacher and local knowledge in second language curriculum development, writing:

Teachers in different communities have to devise curricula and pedagogies that have local relevance. 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).
Professional teacher education organizations have also highlighted the need for candidates to integrate local knowledge into their teaching. In 2009 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).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

These calls for the legitimate role of local knowledge in language teacher education are in line with our own philosophies as critical language and literacy teacher educators and with the realities of our contexts: preparing language teachers for public schools in plurilingual urban communities. We are informed by sociocultural approaches to language and literacy education which posit that learning occurs in the social practices of a community/culture (GEE, 2004), and teachers are positioned as transformative intellectuals whose knowledge of classrooms and schools are valuable contributions to educational reforms and debates (GIROUX, 1988; COCHRAN-SMITH and LYTLE, 1993). Building on these tenets, our project both evokes and expands upon Moll et al. 's work with "funds of knowledge" (1992) and uses the concepts of community teacher (MURRELL, 2001), community-integrated pedagogies (SCHECHTER, SOLOMON and KITTMER, 2003); and situated literacies (BARTON, HAMILTON and IVANIC, 2000) to create a conceptual and pedagogical framework.
Developed out of the traditions of John Dewey (1933), Paulo Freire (1988), and leaders and teachers in and before the Civil Rights movement in the United States, a “community teacher” spends quality time in the community where he or she is going to teach in order to better serve his/her students. As Murrell (2001) asserts,

the community teacher is aware of and when necessary, actively researches the knowledge of the cultures represented among the children, families, and communities he or she serves...The CT enacts those knowledge traditions as a means of making meaningful connections for and with children and their families...Community teacher knowledge emerges from a complex mix of reflective experience, cultural knowledge and critical inquiry (p. 51-52).

In community-situated pedagogies teachers design curriculum that reflect knowledge of the communities and neighborhoods where they teach. The lessons and activities must be based on interactions with not just descriptions of members of the community (e.g., parents, students, and other community members (SCHECTER, SOLOMON, and KITTMER, 2003).

For us, the challenge is not why do this work but rather how? How do we help teachers see and appreciate the resources surrounding the schools they serve? After locating the first stage of our project within a critical action research tradition, we describe how we have worked to develop a community teacher sensibility through new types of community field assignments.

**METHOD**

Action research is systematic inquiry into one’s work, and typically includes the following steps or stages: identifying an issue, formulating a question to pursue, planning and implementing an
investigation or action plan, analyzing/reflecting on the endeavor and articulating implications/strategies for future practice. Ideally, it is a cyclical, self-generating process where each new project can generate new issues/questions to investigate. We did not intentionally design the first stage of our collaboration as an action research project but now as we assess our progress thus far, we realize that we have followed a critical action research cycle. We don’t see this as artificial imposition but rather a reflection of our typical approach to educational issues and challenges.

Within the three traditions of action research categorized by Masters (1995), we place our project within the critical emancipatory type which includes analysis and questioning of social/political contexts and how the cultural values and ideologies of these contexts shape policies, practices and possibilities (MILLS, 2000). We have created and implemented new assignments that encourage teachers to reclaim the legitimate role of local knowledge and honor the plurilingual richness of our urban centers. When successful, the teacher reflections serve as counternarratives that challenge restrictive language policies. Below, we share descriptions of these activities followed by an analysis the texts they generated. The descriptions are fairly detailed so that interested colleagues may explore their potential in their own programs.

PROJECTS AND POSSIBILITIES IN BOGOTÁ AND MANCHESTER

The activities and reflections we report here are from courses run between fall 2008 and 2011. Over this period, our students have granted permission to share their work across our contexts and we believe this exchange has enhanced the learning for all of us.

Inspired by the city project in Medellin Amparo created a new assignment for her Fall 2008 Seminar on Literacy course designed to introduce her English language teachers to the megalibraries in Bogotá. The purpose was to help in-service teachers: see the libraries as places where children experienced multiple literacies; associate these poor urban
centers with rich resources, and consider how to bring the biblored into their teaching. The teachers were divided into teams, each one assigned to visit a different library and given a set of guiding questions addressing each library's history; usage (number of visitors and circulation); design; resources; programs; and impact on the community. In a subsequent class, each team presented their findings and shared pedagogical implications.

The assignment not only helped the teachers expand their notions of literacy – as they saw children and adults using literacies in multiple ways and for multiple purposes but it also helped them see and appreciate the multitude of assets in the communities – not only the library but the people who used it and their involvement in creating and participating in the community events and activities held at the library (e.g., family story telling; art projects, musical performances, meetings on community issues, etc.). They saw the multiple possibilities the libraries offer to their students as learners and the pedagogical value of libraries for them as parents as well as teachers. They were then able to create lessons that connected their classrooms to the students’ worlds outside of school. Amparo came to conclude that teachers needed to experience the library immersion as learners to realize the multiple possibilities it offers their students as learners. The teachers reflected upon the potential pedagogical value of libraries as parents and as teachers. By introducing teachers to the notion of libraries as local, explicit, practice where language is used for a variety of purposes they were able to connect literacy instruction to out of school learning experiences and consider using their students’ funds of knowledge to plan their teaching of language and literacy.

During the summer of 2009, we drafted some community-based investigation assignments and did them ourselves in Bogotá in order to see if what we were asking students to do was feasible in a short amount of time. We created and uploaded two projects (The Bogotá Alphabet; Bogotá school barrio take 2) on YouTube as models (SHARKEY, n.d.a; n.d.b). Then, in the Fall semester, Judy added a community investigation
assignment to her ESOL Curriculum and Assessment course. Since 2009, forty-three students (twenty-eight in-service; fourteen pre-service; and two education generalists) have completed this assignment. Three of the options are the neighborhood alphabet; locating and visiting a key place in the community; and doing a language/literacy inventory of a neighborhood. The 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?

In another option teacher learners 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?

For the mapping and language/literacy inventory, students pick a three-four block area around a school, create a map after walking the area, write a rich description with sensory details and make an inventory

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5 Please see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xYoRJmeSU
of the different types and forms of language and literacy they see and hear. Sample reflection questions include: What strikes you about the neighborhood? As you analyze the different types of language you encountered, their forms and purposes, what does it tell you about how language/literacy is used and valued in the community? How is this similar to and/or different from the language/literacy of your childhood neighborhood? The i-movie example based on the Bogotá investigation helps the students see how to do this option.\

No matter which option students chose they had to generate specific, concrete ideas for ways to bring this community knowledge into their pedagogies.

The projects produced in Manchester in 2009 were read by Amparo, her university colleague, Maribel Ramirez Galindo and in-service teachers in Bogotá. Reading about the linguistic resources the UNH students had identified helped the Colombian teachers imagine what they might find in their own school communities. Based on these experiences Amparo and Maribel developed and integrated a community-based pedagogies strand into the spring 2010 Introduction to Research course for first semester graduate students in the applied linguistics program, a group of 16 in-service EFL teachers working in a variety of settings: public and private bilingual primary and secondary schools as well as, classrooms in universities and language institutes. Maribel, the instructor of the course and a public secondary school teacher, expressed great interest in the topic and agreed to share her assignments and experiences with us.

After reading and discussing some introductory articles related to community-based pedagogies the class planned an informal visit to the community surrounding their teaching contexts. They were asked to focus on describing public places where students could regularly meet and the businesses around the schools like small grocery stores, discotheques, video game places, libraries, shopping centers, sport centers

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6 Please see http://youtube/BiypTrYs_FM
and parks. In class, they shared the outcomes of their explorations and
Maribel used Judy’s students reports as models for a more in depth
neighborhood mapping assignment. Students then wrote reflections
about ways in which the community could become a central source to
inform and reorient their curriculum. This collection of activities and
reflections became the point of departure for thinking about integrating
community literacy practices in the required research proposal students
wrote as the final paper for the class. Maribel reports that the students
had more informed conceptions of the community and its role in the
curriculum were able to suggest ways to integrate community literacy
activities in their curriculum. Furthermore, these students were now able
to think about how a community-situated literacies perspective might be
one of the theoretical frameworks they used as they looked ahead to their
graduate research theses in applied linguistics.

In two subsequent trips to Bogotá Judy was able to talk to the
students about their investigations and brought their insights back to
New Hampshire and revise her assignments, inspired by the
Colombian perspectives and interpretations of the community-based
pedagogies. She has since added community field experiences to three
other courses and is working with other colleagues to develop and
articulate a community teacher philosophy for the urban teacher education
program at UNH.

**ANALYSIS**

Our analysis is guided by the question posed for this first stage of
our collaboration, namely: How do we promote knowledge of /in local
communities as rich resources for teaching and learning? We assembled
the projects and reflections generated by more than 70 students in our
differing contexts and analyzed them for: evidence of teachers valuing
local knowledge; and evidence of teachers seeing communities as
resources for teaching and learning. We then sought to identify the
challenges and issues raised by the assignments. As mentioned earlier, we did not set out to do an action research project at this exploratory stage. We were intentional in our learning but did not set up a formal study and this is a limitation of our analysis. However, we believe that the ongoing analysis of this exploratory stage has produced powerful insights.

WHAT WE’VE LEARNED SO FAR

Overall, the vast majority of students reported enjoying the community investigations for a variety of reasons including the alternative nature of the assignments which encouraged their own creativity, the opportunity to learn about different communities and their students’ lives outside of school, and the generative nature of the sharing of experiences and ideas for curriculum. They also reported experiencing a range of emotions, some expressing initial doubt even fear that then turned to pleasant, even energizing attitudes about the potential of community as curriculum and an increased sense of self-efficacy in connecting with students and families whose backgrounds are different from their own.

The community assignments were effective in raising awareness across multiple dimensions from changing perspectives of neighborhoods, the importance of out of school interactions in building teacher – student and/or teacher/family relationships, and how so see the community as curriculum. These statements are evidenced in the following excerpts from the students’ reflections.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON NEIGHBORHOODS

Before teachers can learn how to integrate local knowledge and resources into their curriculum they must first know what is in the community and learn how to identify its assets. For some of our teachers this meant shifting from a deficit to asset based perspective.
Before I actually walked around the neighborhood of [the school], I was a little hesitant to take on this assignment. My impression of the neighborhood was not very positive. I viewed the neighborhood as being 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 or dirty, I felt intrigued and wanted to see more. I did not feel unsafe for one moment. The best part was seeing one of my students..... 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, UNH student, Fall 2010

For other students, the new awareness was an enhanced understanding of the community. The point is not to deny or ignore the realities of some lower income neighborhoods but rather expand what one sees. For example,

My original description of run down has greatly expanded since the walk. Yes, it is run down but the neighborhood is so rich in colors, smells, music and interesting old architecture. There are playgrounds everywhere, porches filled with people’s drying laundry, and over-flowing household objects. Garbage and junk fill some yards, yet others are filled with beautiful flower gardens and even a few vegetable gardens (Judy L, UNH student, Fall 2010).

Students often remarked that it was the guided focus of the assignments that helped deepen their observations. “I was amazed by how the simple intention of discovering the alphabet requires one to slow down, notice one’s surroundings on a deeper level. Who do I see? Who is walking along the same city streets? Who is sitting on the park benches?” (Elizabethe, UNH student, Fall 2010).

In every group of in-service teachers in the ESOL and Curriculum class, two to three write of a new critical awareness: when
they have used “real life” examples in their curriculum they always used
their own lives as the source of these examples and not their students.
After the community investigation they realize they need to be more
conscious of including students’ worlds in their teaching.

Spending a few hours in the neighborhood allowed me to become more
aware of my own ‘lens’ and focus more sharply on the reality of an ESL
student. If the filter through which I view my students is wider and
more open, then the better able I will be to teach them and tune into
their needs (JL Fall 2010).

This awareness may be a crucial stage in becoming a community
teacher (MURRELL, 2001). Paulo Freire spoke of a similar insight in his
own development as a literacy educator, “I said many beautiful things
but they made no impact. This was because I used my frame of reference,
not theirs” (cited in MACKIE, 1980, p. 3-4).

THE VALUE OF OUT OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND INTERACTIONS
FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Students found great value in the community field work for their
teaching, stating that it helped them see students as people with lives and
identities outside of school.

This activity has shown me the person behind the student, and how
they belong to a community… a specific environment that shapes their
behaviour (UDFJC student, Danny, Spring 2009).

Two of Maribel’s in-service teachers who were teaching at a
language institute observed their students in a café near the school and
realized the students’ healthy relationship as classmates pre-dated their
teaching. They wrote,
One of the most surprising aspects was that this community visit allowed us to understand the origin of the nice rapport among [our] students. We [teachers] many times think that a pleasant learning atmosphere is just the result of our people skills or simply a matter of luck. Now we understand that such connection among students is also built through encounters that take place beyond the language classroom (Maira y Daniel, Spring, 2010).

Several students also wrote about how seeing the challenging realities of some neighborhoods gave them new found respect for the resiliency and survival skills of children and families living there. Pamela, one of Maribel's in-service teachers 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. In addition to the trauma of forced internal migration, these children do not speak Spanish and their daily journey to school includes navigating extreme high crime areas where prostitution, drug trafficking, and gang violence are part of their new worlds.

Several students found the interactions with community members and/or students and parents very rewarding. Becky, one of Judy's in-service teachers explored the neighborhood where a number of Somali refugee families were living. Becky met two young girls who invited her into their home and introduced her to their mother. Becky was overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of the family as they invited her to share a meal with them, told her about their culture, customs and religion and then took her to a nearby grocery store, the only one in town that prepared meat according to Islamic guidelines.

Hope's experience illustrates both the need and powerful potential of out of school interactions in strengthening school-family relationships:

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 and after the initial shock wore off, Duc came running into my arms. 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 of them 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 as 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, UNH student Fall 2009).

Pamela, Becky and Hope’s experiences capture the powerful learning that can occur in just one community investigation but Liz, a pre-service teacher is at the next stage of critical awareness, her reflection emphasizing that teachers need to consider issues of access when identifying existing community resources. In her investigation she identified libraries, museums, and after school programs in the area near her target school but raised several critical questions:

How do homeless students get library cards if they have no proof of address? The art museum is free for children under 18 but what if their parents won’t let them go alone? Or can’t afford the $10 admission for themselves? An urban teacher needs to embrace the community but also become a member of it as well. There are many free events at Veterans’ Park all year but only an active community member would be aware of such events (Fall 2010).
We asked students to generate specific ideas for integrating community knowledge into their curriculum and this proved to be easier for some than others. Almost everyone who did the alphabet hunt suggested adaptations of the assignment for their own classrooms, always involving their students in the task. An in-service teacher suggested having students use the language/literacy inventory to teach the concept of language register. He’d have his students record the language heard between different speakers in their neighborhoods and analyze how the relationships between speakers affected language choice.

Emily was teaching in an adult ESOL program in a seacoast town in New Hampshire when she did her project. She decided to do a neighborhood investigation in Boston’s Chinatown (about an hour south of her town) because that is where her Chinese students told her they went shopping. She brought her two children along and made them co-investigators. Then, she shared her experience and photographs with her Chinese students. It was in her conversation with them that she developed a wonderful idea:

My favorite idea is to create a family investigation project. I showed some of the pictures to one of my students and it opened up a whole new dialogue between us. She loved that my son had taken the pictures and that he had raised so many questions. She is planning on doing something similar with her daughter. She thinks it would be a great way to deepen understanding and open up dialogue with her. This is a dynamic way for [immigrant] parents to interact with their children [growing up in the US] who may be rejecting or not understanding their parents’ culture (Fall 2010).

Emily’s experience and subsequent conversation with her students energized her pedagogical thinking and reflects her growing
development as a community teacher. Her reflection also evokes Freire’s insistence that curriculum be generative and co-created with learners in ways that invite their worlds into the process and project (1973).

All of our students stated that they benefitted from sharing their experiences and reflections because reading and hearing classmates’ ideas generated more possibilities. However, the two groups who needed more help in developing curricular connections were the pre-service teachers who had limited curriculum development experiences and the in-service teachers working in schools whose student population did not share a geographical community. For example, the majority of Maribel’s in-service teachers worked at institutions such as universities, private bilingual schools or city language schools that attracted students from all over the city. The key learning for us here is that we need to do a better job of defining “community” and inviting our students into creating a shared understanding. Beyond geography there are ideological, socioeconomic, political, cultural, linguistic communities. One of Judy’s students, who was completing his one year internship as a social studies teacher in a predominantly White, English-speaking, middle class middle school thought he couldn’t do a community investigation in that small suburb because he said there were no English learners in that town. He drove an hour away to a city with a 83% Hispanic population. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully unpack what assumptions this student was working under but it suggests a White, English-speaking norm where “culture,” “ethnic,” “race,” “urban,” and “language” are all codes for “not-White, non-English speaking, poor.”

The transmigrant reality of our urban centers also complexifies this 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?

**IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

We are encouraged by the learning generated by and with students in this first stage of our project. Designing and integrating community-based field assignments into our teacher education classes did promote the valuable role of community knowledge in teaching and learning. However, we know this is just the first step in the larger project of investigating the role of community based pedagogies in students’ language and literacy development. The students’ 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.”

Therefore, as we move forward with our work, immediate steps include revising assignments to include more in-depth discussions of “community” and connecting this to more guidance in ethnographic observation skills and dispositions. However, we also see our students, our teacher learners as co-investigators as the project moves forward. A number of our students are now entering and/or completing their teaching practica and have expressed interest in continuing this work on becoming community teachers and taking up the question: how do we integrate community-based pedagogies into our curriculum?
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