ABSTRACT

This paper reports part of a larger collaborative project between researchers from Universidad Distrital in Bogota and University of New Hampshire that promoted the use of local communities as resources for curriculum. The study aimed at documenting how teachers from different areas of the curriculum, create and implement community-based pedagogies (CBP) to promote the use of their local communities as resources for the EFL curriculum. The question that guided the study was: How we can promote knowledge of/in local communities as rich resources for language teaching and learning? The overarching goal of the project is to reclaim the value of local knowledge in curriculum, helping teachers see and leverage the rich plurilingual/cultural resources in their urban sites. Professional development (pd) sessions were carried out with the participating teachers in order to explore community resources and its significance in the curriculum.

Key words: community based pedagogies, professional development, curriculum renewal

INTRODUCTION

As language teacher educators at Universidad Distrital and University of New Hampshire, while in a conference in Medellin in 2008, my colleague Judy Sharkey and I became interested in exploring how to reclaim the value of local knowledge in teaching and learning. We were inspired by two initiatives that reflected a “city as curriculum” philosophy: the libraries campaign –and the “metrocultura” or the “culture of the metro” were visible. 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?

We started looking at prior experiences in our teaching that might have reflected the idea of using the city as a curricular source to build upon those experiences. After that, we (Judy Sharkey and I) decided to propose field assignments to our graduate students in
order to explore the sources available in the closest physical community to schools and examine the value these sources may have in the school curriculum. The students from New Hampshire did the field assignments first and wrote reflections that described the outcomes of the experience. Their reports were shared with our graduate students taking the introduction to research course in the Masters program in Applied Linguistics at Universidad Distrital in Bogota. This exchange of experiences during 2009 was the starting point for a research project on Community Based Pedagogies developed between 2011 and 2012 that included a group of 11 teachers from two public schools, a public university and a private university in Bogota.

This paper reports on the experiences of two teachers from one of the participating public schools. It describes the physical context of the school and the University, the conceptual framework that supports the study, the professional development sessions that were carried out with all the participating teachers, the community investigations that the two teachers carried out with students and the curricular units they planned and implemented with their students.

THE CONTEXT

The context for the community investigations reported here was a public school in Bogotá. The school is located to the south west of Bogota in Kennedy neighborhood. It is a technical school that hosts 1200 students from preschool to eleventh grade in each shift, morning and afternoon since 1989. The neighborhood is characterized by a variety of micro industries, as well as other local businesses. The families in the community belong to the low-income class. Most of the students attending the school live in the same neighborhood. As a technical school, its curriculum offers three different emphases for students to choose according to their interests: Food processing, electricity and industrial mechanics. SENA (The National Institution for Technical Learning Services) supports the technical training in tenth and eleventh grades since 2010. The school emphases on vocational education respond to families and students’ local needs for specialized education that generates working possibilities. Four teachers from the public school participated in the project: A language arts 8th grade teacher, a chemistry teacher, a social studies teacher and a primary school teacher.

The research team led the pedagogical and research project from Distrital University consisting of three researchers and three graduate students as research assistants. The Master program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL at Distrital University provided the physical spaces for the four professional development sessions carried out after two introductory workshops that were held in the school and university with the groups of teachers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is informed by sociocritical approaches to literacy and teacher education and community based pedagogies. It is grounded on the ideas of authors like Freire and Macedo (1987) Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, (1992) and Canagarajah’s (2006) who
believe that people´s communities and local knowledge are central to curriculum and pedagogy.

This study is also framed by views of Language Teacher Education that include the teaching of Spanish, indigenous languages, and English as a foreign language from a community teaching approach that value the use of local knowledge in schools. When teachers inquire in the local community to identify valuable resources to establish connections with the curriculum, it is possible to broaden the opportunities for meaningful learning and to recognize multiple literacy practices used by learners that account for their local knowledge surpassing the traditional practices promoted by schools.

Canagarajah`s (2005) words highlight the value of local knowledge in curricula by explaining that:

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).

Regarding community-situated pedagogies Schecter, Solomon and Kittmer (2003) posit community as curriculum resource and challenge teachers to design and implement pedagogies based on community. They believe that it is key to engage teachers in formative experiences in problem solving around issues related with the school community in order to create an inclusive school climate for learning. Similarly, Johnson (2009), believes that professional development of teachers that is “self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning is directly relevant to teachers´ classroom” (p.95). From a sociocultural perspective, her contribution points to two key issues: “the school context and culture in which teachers´ accounts of classroom experiences emerge and the powerful linkages between teachers classroom experience and the professional discourses and practices that exist beyond their localities” (p.96).

A Community Teaching Approach to Language Teacher Education

A big challenge for teacher educators is to help teachers see and appreciate the resources surrounding the schools they serve as valuable information to orient the curriculum, the linguistic, social and cultural diversity of their students as well as their subjectivities. Schecter, Solomon and Kittmer (2003) believe that it is key to engage teachers in formative experiences in problem solving around issues related with the school community in order to create an inclusive school climate for learning. The authors identify that there is a need for teachers to develop appropriate foundational knowledge about the social,
psychological, cultural, political and economic forces that affect the teaching and learning process for individuals and groups.

Murrell’s (2001) concept of the community teacher illustrates the complexity of the knowledge teachers need to possess in order to value what the communities offer in their educational endeavour:

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 (pp. 51-52).

Encouraging language teachers to investigate their community contexts not only has important implications for student learning, this contextual knowledge also plays an integral role in teacher thinking, particularly around curriculum development (Sharkey, 2004). Working with a group of English language teachers as they sought to develop a school district ESOL curriculum, Sharkey found that the teachers used knowledge of context as a critical mediator in the process. However, absent among the multiple layers of contexts that teachers were considering—from local school policies and practices to national educational policies, was specific cultural/linguistic knowledge of the students in their classrooms and schools. Thus, if teachers are using knowledge of contexts in their curriculum but leaving out the students’ contexts—and how the students understand their contexts, it suggests our project may be of benefit to teacher thinking as well as student learning.

Lastly, we believe that 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. An asset-based approach 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. Sharkey & Clavijo Olarte, (2012, p.41).

**METHOD**

We employed a collective case study methodology in our investigation. As Stake (2000) asserts, case study is a common type of qualitative research that reflects not a choice of methodology but a choice of phenomena to be studied. For the purposes of our project, the phenomena is teachers using local resources to develop and enhance language and literacy instruction. Case studies necessitate clearly identifiable cases and boundaries
(Cresswell, 2007). For our project, the study is bounded by participants, location (i.e., school sites), time, and task (i.e., curriculum that reflects community knowledge).

A collective case study investigates a number of cases in order to understand a phenomenon with the purpose of leading to deeper understanding and possible theorizing (Stake, 2000). Such an approach allows us to create cases around individual teachers and/or the five participating schools. It thus allows us to value the particulars of each participant and school while also looking for similarities and differences across them. Such an approach is consistent with our valuing of the local but also in the importance of situating the local in larger contexts, be those city, state, nation, or global. Research questions within case studies reflect the fact that “issues are complex, situated, problematic relationships” (Stake, 2000, p. 440).

The four principal types of data to be collected are:

a) interviews (individual, semi-structured and focus groups);

b) participant learning logs/profiles;

c) observations (in classrooms and of the professional development activities); and

d) documents (lessons/curriculum teachers produce; and existing, mandated or suggested curriculum provided by schools).

In terms of data management, once the data were gathered, the research assistants and the researchers transcribed the audiotaped interviews with teachers and the videotaped sessions during the workshops. To make the data available for all researchers, it was organized into different folders and shared in google drive.

Research question: How we can promote knowledge of/in local communities as rich resources for language teaching and learning?

Research objectives:
- Determine the relationship between teachers’ knowledge of their students’ lived experiences and communities and their curriculum
- Identify and evaluate how teachers’ use of community knowledge/resources affects their language/literacy instruction

Considering that the professional development component was vital to support teachers’ community projects in the study, I describe the different workshop sessions that were led by the research team at Universidad Distrital.

The professional development component

The study included a professional development component with the teachers. For the research team from Universidad Distrital and University of New Hampshire it was very
important to visit the schools and explore the immediate community with teachers. The main objective of the introductory workshop was to map the closest neighborhood in order to identify assets in the community that could provide information relevant to the curriculum in the different subject areas. Teachers used cellular phones and cameras to photograph the places and objects in their community that, for them, were relevant to their subject areas.

After the introductory workshop with the teachers at schools, the research team guided four professional development sessions with the teachers at the university. A second workshop was intended to establish the links between the information collected from the mapping of the community resources and the curricular standards from each subject area. The research team used all the photographs teachers collected from the mapping and identified the main community assets to show teachers the relevance and significance of using them as curriculum resources. Teachers were invited to think about possible questions to pose to generate/create community investigations with their students. We noticed that some teachers were much more familiar and comfortable with the idea of community investigations than others possibly because their actual teaching had been focused on classroom projects. We also noticed that all of them were surprised to find the relevant connections of community resources to their content areas for teaching and learning. The workshop sessions promoted a lot of thinking, sharing and reflecting among teachers and between the teachers and the research team about their insights and reactions regarding the relevance of using local knowledge to plan their teaching and its significance in students learning through community investigations.

The implementation of community projects

The subsequent workshops were intended to plan and design the curricular units with teachers. It was expected that from the experience mapping the community and reflecting about how to use the information from different community assets in their teaching teachers would plan community investigations with students in each subject area. Teachers worked together with peers from the same grade level to plan the curricular unit, they then submitted it to the team who provided feedback and made pedagogical suggestions for teachers to start the 12-week implementation with students during August to November.

During August, September, October and November 2013, the researchers visited the teachers’ classrooms weekly to observe, support and document the implementation of community investigations with students. Two semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers; one at the beginning of the implementation and one at the end of it. It helped the research team document the pedagogical planning, the actual teaching and the learning outcomes from students. Teachers came up with very interesting community projects. The following table lists the projects implemented by teachers with their students at this public school.
Table 1: Overview of teachers’ community projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Grade/level</th>
<th>Title of project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>8th grade Language Arts</td>
<td>The concrete books in Argelia-Carimagua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2</td>
<td>10th grade Chemistry</td>
<td>My barrio is a space for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 3</td>
<td>11th grade social studies</td>
<td>A socio economic study of our neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 4</td>
<td>5th grade all subjects</td>
<td>Using our reality to explore and recognize our neighborhood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In November, the researchers invited the teachers to present the results of the implementation of the classroom investigations with the students to a wider audience of the city of Bogota in the Annual Symposium on Literacies and Discourse Studies that the graduate program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL from Distrital University organizes every November. The teachers from the school submitted the abstract of their project to the scientific committee of the academic event and they were accepted to participate.

OUTCOMES OF TEACHERS’ COMMUNITY INVESTIGATIONS

In this section, I describe two of the community investigations that two veteran school teachers from the public school carried out with students as a way to illustrate the pedagogical implementation of their community investigations with low socioeconomic level students in grades 8th and 10th.

Community Project 1 in Spanish Class: The Concrete Books in Argelia – Carimagua

Teacher 1 developed a nine-week unit on graffiti for her 42 eighth grade students in Spanish language arts class. The project had three phases: mapping and analyzing the graffiti in the school neighborhood; understanding the aesthetics and semiotics of graffiti; and producing student-authored graffiti for the neighborhood. For the first phase, students walked around the neighborhood, took pictures of the different types of graffiti that drew their attention and e-mailed the photos to the teacher who used them in power point slides to use for class discussion and initial analysis. During the second phase, the teacher invited graffiti experts and artists into the class to share the history of graffiti, provide an overview of key techniques and symbols in the images. As a bridge between the second and third phases, the teacher had the students do local investigations on popular sayings in Spanish, a very typical part of the language/literature curricula. The teacher presented the outcomes of students’ learning in the symposium as follows:

In the graffiti project students learned to recognize their community as a valuable resource for learning. They learned to interpret graffiti as ways of expressions from people.
from the community. Eighth grade students also learned to recognize the different characteristics, styles and designs of graffiti by making their own graffiti in groups. Her own reflection as a teacher using the community as a resource was

The community has a variety of resources that can significantly enrich the language curriculum. By doing linguistic mapping of Argelia community students collected valuable information about graffiti as a cultural way of expression of people who live there (interview and symposium presentation, Nov. 2013)

Table 2 below presents an example of curricular planning done by the eight-grade teacher in the Spanish class.

Table 2: initial curricular planning of the community project for eight grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Description of activities</th>
<th>Learning Objective</th>
<th>Curricular standards</th>
<th>Community resources</th>
<th>Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>Students photograph different graffiti from streets in their barrios</td>
<td>Identify the different graffiti types in students barrios through photographs. Email the photos to the teacher</td>
<td>Understand and interpret texts, taking into account how the language works in specific communicative situations.</td>
<td>Graffiti found in the barrios</td>
<td>Pictures of graffiti in barrios around the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-13</td>
<td>Presentation of graffiti and selection by type of graffiti</td>
<td>Recognize the graffiti in different places of the neighborhood around the school. Interpret the messages from the graffiti found in the neighborhood</td>
<td>Graffiti found in the barrios (ppt)</td>
<td>Presentation and interpretation of graffiti messages.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the initial stage of the community project with eight graders, the teacher asked students to take pictures of different graffiti around the barrio as resources to study the messages displayed in the community around the school and the barrio.

Community Project 2: In the English Class

Teacher 1 also worked CBP with students in the English as foreign language class. The teacher had students walk around the neighborhood looking for examples of English advertisements. Students took pictures and sent them to the teacher via e-mail. She planned a classroom lesson using power point with the images students sent and had a guided conversation making connection to the standards and to the community project. Duvan, one of the student wondered about Why in Colombia there are ads in English if we speak Spanish? A few of the pictures he collected show the type of English found near Duvan’s school.

Duvan collected the following four responses from asking people in different businesses in his neighborhood why they used English ads: Duvan stated: “The people
around the world need to do publicity for their business ..... Because 1) people like it ... so I sell more, 2) People like it because it attracts attention, 3) People want to see English ads because it's attractive to them and it's very important for the publicity whether they understand it or not, 4) Every time people like to see more English ads because it gives an elegant touch. (Student artifact, August 2013).

This mini class project generated participation from all students as they reported on what they found and a socio cultural understanding of how businesses operate in their neighborhood.

Community Project 2: My Barrio as a Space for Learning

Teacher 2 is a chemistry teacher concerned about industrial safety in her barrio. The teacher planned and implemented a community project titled *My barrio is a space for learning* with 32 tenth grade students. The initial question the teacher posed to students was what type of industries have environmental impact of chemicals used in industries and small businesses around the school? The teacher invited her students to start by collecting photographic evidences from the neighborhood of environmental impacts of chemicals through a community mapping exercise.

The teacher believes that the objective of all science studies is to study nature, look for explanations of observed phenomena, and use various methods to make predictions for future occurrences in particular situations. She considers that the study of science permits individuals to understand their physical realities and to explain basic situations about it. Thus, in her seven-week community investigation, her students collected information about the type of chemicals used by small businesses in the neighborhood, reported orally to class about the types of environmental impacts and finally, constructed a brochure in Spanish on the specific positive or negative impacts each industry had in the environment. For the teacher this community investigation experience made students protagonists of their own learning.

Through the initial exploration of the neighborhood sources in search of information that could be relevant to her chemistry class, the teacher found multiple sources available and reflected upon the need to do inquiry with her students to enrich her curriculum. In an informal conversation with the teacher after the class observation, she expressed:

This was a good opportunity to show the applications of chemistry; as using the lab was not logistically possible, the community business and places came to serve as replacement for this resource. She added; the project allowed students to deepen in their specialties: food engineering and electronics. It also served for students to think about their life projects, for example, the student who visited the drug store realized he wanted to be a doctor
The curricular planning for the chemistry class is presented in the following table.

### Table 3. Curricular planning chemistry class for tenth grade

**General Objective:** To apply relevant knowledge of chemistry in students’ everyday situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Description of the activity</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Resources from the community</th>
<th>Products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 August 20-23</td>
<td>Students take pictures from the neighborhood that address the following issue: What type of local industries damage the environment</td>
<td>Analyze the conditions of chemical materials in a specific time and under certain conditions as to how the materials interact with the environment</td>
<td>All physical spaces and industries that are close to students houses and school community</td>
<td>Photographs and interviews to people from industries in the neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 2</strong></td>
<td>Students were asked to explain why they took pictures and the relevance of the pictures taken</td>
<td>To recognize the type of industries that are found in my neighborhood</td>
<td>Analyze the conditions of chemical materials in a specific time and under certain conditions as to how the materials interact with the environment</td>
<td>Cameras, cell phones</td>
<td>Photographs and a written report on each of the photograph taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 26-30</td>
<td>The following step was to organize the photographs taken by all the students in order to classify them into the different fields within chemistry</td>
<td>To classify the community places found according to the different fields within chemistry</td>
<td>Internet and photographs</td>
<td>Classification of the physical places found in the community according to the different fields within chemistry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 3</strong></td>
<td>Students classified the photographs into one of the fields of chemistry: Environmental impact - industrial safety - raw materials, products and finished products</td>
<td>To identify and value chemical material found in the community to observe how individuals, using chemical materials, interact with the environment</td>
<td>Internet and photographs</td>
<td>Internet and photographs selected in different industrial spaces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2-6</td>
<td>This activity involves the emotional part of the students in regard to what feelings are attached to the photographs students have taken</td>
<td>To identify students’ emotional connection to their neighborhood</td>
<td>Students Perceptions of phenomena in everyday experiences</td>
<td>Physical spaces selected by students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 5</strong></td>
<td>Once students identified, selected and learned about the environmental</td>
<td>To identify students’ appreciation and understanding of the content of</td>
<td>Students’ Perceptions of phenomena in everyday</td>
<td>Internet Photographs Computer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 16-20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Week 6</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 23-27</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
situations in the photographs taken in their immediate community, they shared with the class what they learned about chemistry

chemistry through the community experience

experiences

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected from teachers’ interviews, class observations, planning and their academic presentation of the outcomes of the community project carried out with students evidence that teachers became aware of the useful resources available and used them in interesting ways to guide students’ projects. The topics of the projects and the activities proposed in the curricular planning shared above also shows curricular transformation and a focus on students’ active participation in learning.

Schoolteachers and their students considered the experience of doing community projects very productive. It brought about changes to the ways teachers design and implement curricula and to the use of local knowledge to solve content related problems. The outcomes were brochures, posters with graffiti, statistic studies of migration to Bogota, written narratives about students’ family histories. Teachers expressed that they looked at their students as learners, their school and its surrounding context differently and more integrated to what they do.

Thus, the research team considers that the professional development carried out with teachers was an opportunity to rethink their teaching practices and propose more meaningful activities to involve students in learning using community resources. Teachers’ expertise in the content areas and their pedagogical knowledge as veteran teachers also played an important role in the pedagogical implementation, student guidance and learning outcomes of the community projects with students.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In this section, I would like to report on the different aspects learned by students, schoolteachers and the research team through doing community investigations. Schoolteachers reported that using the community as content for the curriculum their students learned more about the content areas because learning was directly related to their life. The brochures created by the tenth grade students to share with their classroom peers their learning about how chemicals used in industries have environmental impact was an interesting and meaningful learning experience to them. In addition to exploring about the different chemicals used by industries in their neighborhood, tenth grade students learned to do interviews to the owners of the businesses they visited; they documented their visit and wrote reports, which implied asking questions to gather data about the different processes that imply using such materials to produce what they sell.
Teachers value students’ agency in the co-construction of curriculum. Through the community mapping activity, they increased their awareness of local resources in the communities and recognized the contribution of integrating the community resources to the curriculum in different areas. The research team reflected upon different ways to facilitate teacher professional development in schools, curricular innovations and students’ learning through community experiences.

REFERENCES


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