Article

Developing a Deeper Understanding of Community-Based Pedagogies With Teachers: Learning With and From Teachers in Colombia

Judy Sharkey1, Amparo Clavijo Olarte2, and Luz Maribel Ramírez3

Abstract
Here we share findings from a 9-month qualitative case study involving a school–university professional development inquiry into how teachers develop, implement, and interpret community-based pedagogies (CBPs), an asset-based approach to curriculum that acknowledges mandated standards but begins with recognizing and valuing local knowledge. After describing the structure and activities of the professional development project, we focus on the work and perspectives of four teachers at one public school in Bogotá. The challenges identified were outweighed by the benefits, including increased student engagement, motivation, family–school involvement, and an appreciation of local knowledge as curriculum resource. In addition to generating rich curriculum exemplars in chemistry, social studies, and language arts, the teachers’ interpretations and enactments of CBPs indicate that CBPs are flexible enough to allow multiple entry points, teacher autonomy, and ownership, and share enough commonalities with other pedagogical approaches to allow different learning trajectories for teachers and students.

Keywords
social justice, urban teacher education, partnerships, professional learning communities, international teacher education

Introduction
How and where do teachers learn to bridge the relational gaps caused by restrictive curricular perspectives and changing demographics? Is “community-based pedagogies” (CBPs) a useful concept in this work? How might pursuing these questions with veteran teachers inform our work as teacher educators and serve as exemplars to teacher learners in other urban contexts? These questions guide the exploratory case study that we present here.

Across the globe, a number of restrictive education policies and social realities have worked to distance teachers, students, and curriculum from each other, particularly in underresourced public schools serving low-income students and families (Hawkins, 2014; Rodriguez & Blasco, 2010; Zeichner, 2011). Increased standardization in testing and curriculum has devalued local knowledge, undermined teachers’ professional judgment, and emphasized deficit perspectives of difference (Comber, 2016; Compton-Lilly & Stewart, 2013), while worldwide migration patterns have created significant demographic changes in urban centers (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015). In both our professional contexts—a small immigrant/refugee city in the Northeastern United States (Judy), and the large, vibrant Colombian city of Bogotá (Amparo and Maribel)—local realities reflect these international trends: Teachers working in public schools in high-poverty neighborhoods are serving more children and families whose cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds, and so on do not match their own (Garcia, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010), and they struggle with ways to connect students’ lives to mandated standards that ignore or dismiss local resources, interests, and/or realities (Bomer & Maloch, 2012; Gonzalez, 2007).

Sharing our concerns while attending an education conference in Colombia, we were struck by two very visible community-as-curriculum initiatives in Medellín: the metro (subway) culture campaign and the megalibraries project. Both had clear public pedagogical intentions, inviting citizens to take more participatory roles in accessing and appreciating city resources. Inspired, we initiated an international collaboration to reclaim and insert community resources into our...
respective teacher education curriculum. However, we realized that before teachers could use local knowledge in powerful, productive ways, they needed to know more about the places and spaces students inhabit and address negative assumptions that they might bring to these spaces. Informed by the work of critical and/or urban education scholars who advocate for meaningful curriculum that acknowledges and values learners’ worlds (e.g., Freire, 1970/1988; Marshall & Toohey, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Murrell, 2001), we began integrating a variety of community-based field assignments into our courses and inviting our teacher learners in Colombia and the United States to read each other’s work. Recognizing the political nature of teachers’ work and the particular curricular constraints of the current accountability era, we proposed the concept “community-based pedagogies,” which we defined as

curriculum and practices that reflect knowledge and appreciation of the communities in which schools are located and students and families inhabit. . . . [A]n 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. (Sharkey & Clavijo Olarte, 2012a, pp. 130-131)

Analyzing the resultant products and reflections revealed overall positive results in changing perspectives and generating initial ideas for classroom practices (Sharkey & Clavijo Olarte, 2012a). However, our teacher learners expressed doubt that they could bring this awareness into their contexts, especially in schools that were mandating standards-based curriculum, which seemed to demand a one size fits all approach to teaching and learning. Although our courses included examples of teacher created curriculum that integrated students’ funds of knowledge (e.g., McIntyre, Rosebery, & Gonzalez, 2001), these examples seemed to skip a step in how teachers learn to do this work. In response to these questions and concerns, we sought out inservice teachers open to the idea of working as co-investigators in how teachers develop and implement CBPs.

We formalized the endeavor by designing a 9-month qualitative inquiry housed within a collaborative professional development project with the overarching question and sub-questions: How do public school teachers in Bogotá develop and implement CBPs in their classrooms? (a) Who are these teachers and how do they describe their students, their contexts, and reasons for participating? (b) How do they define and enact CBPs? (c) What benefits and challenges do they report? Finally, how could these findings inform our teacher education programs and practice?

Project Roles and Responsibilities

We were a team of university faculty (Judy in the United States and Amparo’s linguistics graduate program at Amparo’s university, and two research assistants who were also pursuing inquiries into CBPs in their master’s level teacher research projects. We entered this project as teacher educators taking an experiential approach to more fully developing the concept of CBPs. We had varying roles in designing and conducting the research, the workshops, and the analysis. We found ourselves “working the dialectic,” a term Cochran-Smith (2005) uses to refer to the “symbiotic relationship of scholarship and practice in teacher education” (p. 219).

Framing the Project

Social justice teacher education (SJTE) and sociocultural learning theories inform our work with CBPs and our views of students, teachers, and curriculum. Here, we attempt to weave these strands together to make a coherent frame that explains the principal assumptions undergirding our work.

SJTE seeks to reduce the inequities that exist in educational experiences and opportunities afforded to students, acknowledging the impacts that poverty, race, language, geography, and immigration have on the asymmetrical distribution of resources and access to services (Nieto, 2000; Zeichner, 2011). It also recognizes the negative effects standardization has had on teachers’ pedagogical authority and creativity (Comber, 2016). In Colombia, “pedagogical equity” (Calvo, 2007) draws attention to how teaching and learning processes are affected in marginalized, urban communities. We draw on the line of SJTE that takes a collaborative, collective, and situated approach to addressing these inequities, valuing the knowledge, skills, and perspectives that all community members bring to these challenges (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Zeichner, 2011). Teachers are legitimate contributors to the knowledge base, are experts of their particular contexts, capable of theorizing classroom practices, and contributing to reform/policy debates (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009).

We posit teacher learning as an ongoing activity that happens across the career span and professional development as collaborative, context-embedded, and inquiry-based (Johnson, 2009). Consistent with sociocultural theories, teacher learning is socially mediated and evidenced by a change in participation in particular social activities (Borko, 2004). An example of teacher learning could be how they use a new concept, such as CBPs to design and enact a social activity particular to their professional contexts (i.e., a lesson or activity in their classrooms; Johnson & Golombok, 2011), and the ways in which it might change their actions and interactions in the home communities of their schools. Researchers working within this perspective study teacher learning in the complex, myriad contexts in which it occurs, including their classrooms, schools, and in formal and informal discussions with colleagues (Borko, 2004), and seek to understand how certain contextual factors including role of administrative support, student characteristics, and district and school
policy also mediate teacher learning (Desimone, 2009). The goal of learning with and from teachers includes the co- construction of local knowledge and critical engagement with the “research generated by others both inside and outside contexts of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2).

SJTE is also concerned with the nature of curriculum and whose lives, experiences, and trajectories are deemed worthy of study, why and with what consequence (Comber, 2016). As Cochran-Smith (2004) has noted, “students with the greatest academic need are least likely to have access to educational opportunities congruent with their life experiences” (p. 6). Yet, the idea and practice of connecting learning to students’ lives and interests is not new; nor is starting with an assets-based rather than deficit perspective to learners’ identities and realities. Exemplars include Dewey’s (1902/1990) experiential education in the United States, Ashton-Warner’s (1963/1986) language experience approach in New Zealand, and Freire’s (1970/1988, 1969/1987) culture circles and problem-solving in Brazil. Our concept of CBP was informed by Freire’s (1970/1988) insistence that curriculum be locally generated and invite learners to critique and transform their realities, and Murrell’s (2001) call 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).

Using students’ local realities as curriculum starting points is congruent with sociocultural learning theories that highlight the situated, contextualized nature of learning (Hawkins, 2014) and research has shown that learning is enhanced when teachers invite and acknowledge the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences that students bring with them into the classroom (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2004).

As noted above, current reform efforts have severely hampered teachers’ pedagogies. CBPs recognize the political realities that restrict teachers’ autonomy and undermine their intellectual authority in creating curriculum. Teachers cannot ignore the standards, but that does not mean they teach them uncritically. As Kumashiro (2009) points out, standards-based curriculum is not antithetical to social justice education, but they can be taught “in paradoxical ways” (p. xxv) helping students reach them while also questioning what knowledge and perspectives are included/excluded and why.

**Research Design**

We used a qualitative case study design because we sought to understand a complex, situated phenomenon (Stake, 2000) and to understand “how the phenomenon matter[ed] from the perspectives of participants” (Haas Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 81). The case was bounded by time (9 months), participants (four secondary teachers), location (Alfonso López Pumarejo [ALP]’s), and task (developing and implementing a curriculum project). The case we report here is drawn from a larger study involving 25 teachers in four different schools in Bogotá. We created mini-cases or portraits for individual teachers to value the particulars of each participant while also looking for similarities and differences across them.

**Data**

Data from each participant included a two-page questionnaire, two semi-structured interviews (May and November) that were video or audiotaped and transcribed, one classroom observation during implementation of curriculum projects, a completed curriculum-planning template (2-4 pages), and materials created and presented at a research symposium (November). Additional data included field notes and transcriptions of videos from four workshops conducted between February and August (1.5-4 hr each).

In both interviews, teachers described student strengths and challenges through the prism of the work students produced in class. In the final interview, participants shared their grade sheets for the curriculum project, described, and provided evidence for student performance within the projects and their assessment rationale. For the classroom observation, we created a protocol based on the contextualization standard of the five standards for effective pedagogy for diverse students (Doherty, Hilberg, Epaloose, & Tharp, 2002) and had post-observation conferences.

**Analysis**

Consistent with qualitative inquiries, the analysis was reflexive, ongoing, and inductive. The research questions shaped the analytic strategies and initial categories, but we remained open to the unexpected (Haas Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Merriam, 1998). At the end of the project, we assembled the data for each participant, read the different dockets, and individually wrote initial portraits for each participant. We revisited the notes and audio/visual material from the workshops, sites where we could see the participants interacting and responding to questions and materials. We also took into consideration the ways the activities and tasks we designed affected the participants’ responses and artifacts. For example, we provided the planning template used in the curriculum projects.

We used connecting rather than fracturing strategies (Maxwell, 2005) to understand the data in their particular context, identifying the relationships between the various data sources (e.g., interviews, workshop interactions, curriculum). We were not interested in decontextualized categories but sought to create “a coherent whole” (Maxwell, p. 98), while resisting the comfortable story (Haas Dyson & Genishi, 2005). When constructing portraits of our participants that
included descriptions of their pedagogy, we looked for consistency across the data: questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum projects. In doing so, we drew on several tenets from portraiture methodology, striving to show our commitment to the participants and their contexts (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

We also used cross-case strategies grouping answers to interview questions together to understand the variation in interpreting and enacting CBPs.

**Contexts**

**Bogotá, Colombia**

The school year in Colombia runs from late-January to mid-late November with 1-week breaks in spring and fall and a 3-week break in summer. There are no set textbooks, but public school teachers are expected to follow the national curriculum standards organized by subject, grade, and competencies as set forth by the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2006). Class sizes range from 35 to 45, and students may repeat a grade several times before advancing to the next level. There are no state or national exams for a secondary diploma, but students with university aspirations must take and pass a national exam. Depending on the focus of the particular secondary school, teachers prepare students for this exam.

Bogotá, a bustling, sprawling city of approximately 9 million, is divided into 20 barrios (neighborhoods). It is home to more than 400,000 desplazados, persons internally displaced due to violence and conflict (Palacios, 2013). Not surprisingly, the poorest areas of the city attract the highest number of desplazados who often report feeling isolated and discriminated against in urban schools and communities (Doctors Without Borders, 2006). Their isolation is compounded by a fear of violence that inhibits them from sharing their stories in their new destinations (Shultz et al., 2014).

**School Context: ALP**

ALP is a public school in Kennedy, one of the largest districts in the city with a population of over 1 million. It hosts 1,200 students from preschool to Grade 11 each day in two shifts: morning and afternoon. The students principally come from one of five surrounding barrios, the majority of families have lower socioeconomic status, more than two-thirds migrated from other parts of the country and approximately 10% are desplazados. The area is characterized by a variety of micro industries and small businesses. Teachers report a visible illicit drug market and number of homeless people. Beginning in Grade 6, ALP is classified as a technical school, its curriculum offering three different emphases for students to choose from according to their interests: food processing, electricity, and industrial mechanics.

The Community-Based Pedagogies Project at ALP

Here, we describe the activities within the 9-month (February-November) project with ALP to show how we worked with teachers in the development and implementation of CBPs. The core features of effective professional development guided the project design: a focus on teachers’ particular content areas, active learning, coherence (between the key concepts and teachers’ beliefs and knowledge), duration, and collective participation (Desimone, 2009). Epistemologically, we were guided by the characteristics of practitioner-inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), specifically, seeking and valuing the knowledge of all participants, blurring the lines between inquiry and practice, using professional context as inquiry site, maintaining systematicity in documentation, and ongoing reflection.

In February 2013, we held a 1-hr session open to all ALP teachers where we presented the project: its purpose, scope, timeline, and expectations of participation, as well as the key concepts “community teacher,” “funds of knowledge,” asset-based approaches, and “CBP.” There were no stipends or professional development credits; participation was voluntary. The first workshop (March) focused on asset-based approaches to learning, and we began by asking the teachers to identify the strengths and talents they brought to collaborations with colleagues. Then, we shifted attention to asset-mapping, explaining Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993) pie chart schematic used with urban planners to identify categories of assets in a community and examples: physical locations (parks, communal gardens), institutions (libraries, churches, health clinic), associations (trade unions, cultural clubs), individuals (specific people such as community leaders, known elders), and the local economy (stores, shops, street vendors). We divided the teachers into two groups and led them on a 45-min mini-asset mapping exercise, challenging them to find examples for each category in the immediate areas outside of the ALP grounds. We encouraged them to take pictures with their phones and keep a running dialogue during their experience. When the large group reconvened, a few teachers were surprised at their successful completion of the task.

We ended the workshop by asking teachers to reflect on the session, begin to think of ways they might bring the community into their curriculum, and to email us the pictures from their mapping exercise. Two weeks later, teachers interested in continuing completed and returned a questionnaire regarding their professional backgrounds, content areas, motivation for joining the project, a bit about their teaching and their students, and whether they had to use the standards in their curriculum.

The second workshop in May explored making concrete connections between community resources and the curriculum standards. Using a pie chart to evoke the one in the mapping exercise, we changed Kretzman and McNight’s asset
categories to four curriculum areas: language arts, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics. Next, we showed several slides that listed specific standards accompanied by photos the teachers had taken in their mapping exercise. The example from the natural sciences generated a rich discussion, “Identify renewable and nonrenewable resources and the dangers their exposure can cause to human development” (MEN, 2006, p. 137). The teachers connected the particulars of the photographs and the standard to the realities of the people in the neighborhood, their effects on students, and then raised questions regarding state regulation. Teresa, saw immediate possibilities between her subject area, chemistry and industrial safety. At the end of the session, we asked the teachers to start generating concrete connections between their content areas and the community.

A June workshop included teachers from three other participating schools. After sharing and discussing the mapping exercises across the different sites and grade levels, teachers had time to start planning units to begin in July or August. Maribel distributed a curriculum-planning matrix that asked teachers to list, by week, main activities, objectives, standards, community resources, and student products. Another workshop day in August afforded the teachers time and guidance as needed in their curriculum. In September and October, we conducted classroom observations with postobservation conferences. In November, nine teachers—four from ALP, presented their projects at an international symposium hosted by the university.

Focal Teachers

Eleven ALP teachers attended the first two workshops, seven committed to the project until the end, and four developed unit plans and presented at the symposium. We focus on these four because their process from start to finish provided the most comprehensive understanding of how teachers develop and implement CBPs.

The four focal participants, Maribel, Teresa, Marta, and Vianey, were experienced teachers with close to 30 years experience on average (see Table 1). All were self-motivated, reflective practitioners, who valued collaboration and opportunities to work with colleagues; student-centered teachers passionate about their content areas; and facile with curriculum development. Compiled from project data, the following portraits are meant to provide richer understanding of these teachers and the scope of the CBP projects they developed and implemented. Consistent with portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005), we not only wanted to acknowledge these teachers’ “authority, wisdom, and perspectives” but also wanted them “to feel seen, respected, appreciated and scrutinized” (p. 6).

Portraits of the Teachers

Marta: “Yo creía conocerlo y no lo conozco” (“I Thought I Knew This Place and I Don’t”)

Marta, a secondary social studies teacher at ALP for more than two decades, is a poised professional who conveys sincere, caring interest in her students, “men and women with great expectations and ideals for their future” (Symposium handout, November 2013). She described the experience as an appreciated, needed jolt for her practice, or out of her “silla comoda” (comfortable chair), leading her to reassess her understanding of the ALP context, “I’ve been working here for more than twenty years and I thought I knew this place, and I don’t!” (Interview, June 2013). “There were things that were there but they were invisible to me” (Interview, November 2013).

A soft-spoken, passionate, and articulate teacher, Marta believes an understanding of world and national events and history prepares students for success in their professional and/or university trajectories. Students need opportunities and support in developing strong oral and written skills, but

Table 1. Overview of Focus Teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Experience and training</th>
<th>Grade/subject(s)</th>
<th>Curriculum unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vianey</td>
<td>26 years teaching; 2.5 years at ALP BS, trade and accounting; MA, environmental and social recreation</td>
<td>Social studies; Nat'l sciences; art</td>
<td>Grade 5 social studies 10 weeks; 38 students Topic: How social/economic conditions spur political movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>20 years teaching, all at ALP; BS, education with focus on teaching social studies; Also trained as a lawyer</td>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>Grade 11 social studies 9 weeks; 32 students Topic: Population studies—History of migration in Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>32 years teaching; 19 years at ALP BS, chemistry; MS, biology</td>
<td>Chemistry; Nat'l sciences</td>
<td>Grade 10 chemistry 7 weeks; 32 students Topic: Environmental impacts of chemicals used in industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maribel</td>
<td>30 years teaching; 20 years at ALP; BA, modern languages; MA, applied linguistics</td>
<td>Spanish language arts; English</td>
<td>Grade 8 Spanish language arts, 9 weeks; 42 students Topic: Understanding Graffiti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ALP = Alfonso López Pumarejo.
active oral participation is highlighted because “si no habla, pierde la materia” (If you don’t talk, your grade suffers; Interview, June 2013), and these skills will be assets when they graduate. Therefore, roundtable discussions and debates are integral to her pedagogy, and students are comfortable leading these activities and engaging their classmates in critical topics (as noted during the classroom observation, September 2013).

In her 11th grade half-year course focusing on the socio-cultural context of Colombia in the 20th century, Marta created a 9-week investigative unit on the socioeconomic reality of the ALP barrio. The class met twice a week for 2-hr blocks; the 32 students ranged in ages from 15 to 18. She connected the inquiry to the topic of migration studies and demographics related to Bogotá. The unit addressed several national standards, including the following: “identify and analyze the social, economic, political, and cultural consequences caused by the concentration of the population in urban centers away from the countryside” (MEN, 2006, p. 131), and “conduct investigations similar to those of social scientists: design projects, develop investigations, and present the results” (p. 114; Curriculum unit planning template, July 2013). Key activities included students interviewing neighbors and workers in the barrio on their histories in Bogotá (years living in the city; birth place; if not native to the city, motivation for the move, etc.), analyzing the results, creating appropriate visuals to present the findings (see Figure 1), comparing the results to the larger data sets (available online; in textbooks, etc.), and finally preparing and conducting roundtable discussions. Together, the class found that the demographics of their neighborhood closely mirrored the larger data set of the city including the fact that 10% were desplazados and that the majority were not born in Bogotá. Two students co-presented with Marta at the November symposium.

Teresa: “Este proyecto le permite a uno acercarse más a ellos.” (This Type of Project Allows One to Become Closer to the Students)

A veteran with over 30 years’ experience, Teresa has been a teacher at ALP for 19 years, proud of the school’s mission, philosophy, and role as a public institution. She is well versed in the standards and trends in science education, actively pursues professional development opportunities, and is exceptionally strong in her content areas: chemistry and biology. Teresa commands an authoritative presence across the various contexts of ALP, one that exudes a conviction in the role of science to enhance students’ lives, “a pretext to understand their realities” (Symposium handout, November 2013). She has high academic standards for her students while also recognizing the challenges that poverty—and for too many—limited family support create (Interview, June 2013). Teresa’s interests in the project included using community resources to strengthen the science curriculum and learning new ways to develop students’ competencies in science, adding that she valued collaborative professional development because “uno no se las sabe todas” (One cannot know everything; Interview, June 2013). However, more striking was her desire to use community inquiry to nurture teacher–student relationships. Teresa had begun her career as a primary school teacher and said it was difficult getting to know secondary students as well as one does in the primary grades: “A teacher might have small moments during recess or passing students in the hallways but with this type of project, one can get closer to the students” (June 2013).

Teresa focused on her 10th-grade chemistry class of 32 students, ages 14 to 16. She designed a 7-week inquiry unit on the environmental impacts of chemicals used in industries and small businesses around the school. Among several national standards addressed was the overall unit objective “apply relevant knowledge of chemistry to everyday situations” (Instituto Colombiano para el fomento de la educación superior [Colombian Institute for Preparation for Higher Education], 2007, p. 68) and the objective of all science studies “to study nature, look for explanations of observed phenomenon, and use various methods to make predictions for future occurrences in particular situations” (Symposium abstract, November 2013). Teresa began the unit by asking students to do a mapping exercise of their daily journey to school, posing the question, “from the subject of chemistry, what interests you in your neighborhood?” (Unit planning template, August 2013). Students took and emailed photographs to Teresa along with rationale for their choices. The collection became a rich source for analysis, students’
identifying varying features and organizing them into different subtopics of the class: industrial chemistry, industrial safety, and ecology. They shared emotions evoked by the photos and developed individual inquiries on the environmental impacts of a particular industry/business. In the process, students interviewed family members and neighbors who ran or worked in local businesses and shared what they learned in class. Two examples from the October classroom observation were from young women, one who talked about the chemical composition of the shampoo used in the hair salon in her house and another who talked about the chemical treatments used in her family’s jeans business. The majority of students designed inquiries connected to their area of career emphasis. The final product was for each student to create a two-sided information tri-fold summarizing their inquiries and presenting them to classmates. In one example, a student linked knowledge of chemistry to safety standards in her alrededor (neighborhood) butcher shops, noting “Everything changes your understanding when linked to chemistry: Chemistry and butchery.”

Vianey: “Necesitan ser escuchados y comprendidos” (They Need to Be Heard and Understood)

Vianey, a tireless advocate for the children and families served by ALP, was the newest to the school and the only primary teacher participant. With 26 years’ experience and degrees in business and environmental/social recreation, her interest in the project was twofold: make her social studies curriculum more motivating and meaningful, and validate and make public her students’ voices and stories, “they need to be heard and understood for the issues that occur” (Initial questionnaire, May 2013).

Vianey sought and maintained strong partnerships with parents. In fact, she arrived late to the second workshop because she was coming from a meeting informing parents about the project and seeking their support in allowing their children to interview them and share family stories and photographs in class. As a teacher, her priorities are the overall well-being, moral and spiritual development of the children, “who are ultimately the principal part of our work” (Interview, June 2013).

Vianey designed a 10-week unit for her 38 fifth graders, ages 9 to 12 informed by her own professional development question: “How can learning social sciences be meaningful?” (Symposium power point, November 2013). By the end of the unit, students would be able to explain the causes of Colombian Independence movement in the 19th century, but the students and their realities would be the starting point for the curriculum. Two main standards were addressed: “Assume a critical position on situations of discrimination and abuse based on individual traits (ethnicity, gender, etc.) and propose solutions” and “Classify and describe different economic activities in different economic sectors and recognize their impact on communities” (MEN, 2006, p. 125). Using a funds-of-knowledge type approach, Vianey dedicated the first 2 weeks to students’ identifying, sharing, and analyzing the human assets and resources in their households. Students asked parents and grandparents to tell them about a time when they had to declare their independence or leave a bad situation. When students shared their interviews in class, Vianey purposively drew their attention to the resilience and fortitude shown by these adults to endure and/or overcome the hardships they had encountered in their lives. Sending a two-pronged message, these are characteristics we admire and no matter what troubles you may be facing you are surrounded by peers and adults who understand and support you (Classroom observation, September, 2013).

In the following weeks, students shifted focus from their households to their neighborhoods, interviewing business owners and workers, linking these to a larger study on the current major economic activities and issues in the country. They watched and discussed a documentary on the effects of a 2012 trade agreement with the United States on Colombian farmers and farm workers. The stories were similar to some the students had heard in their local investigations and coincided with a work stoppage by agricultural workers in September 2013. In the final weeks, students read and discussed the conditions leading up to Colombia declaring independence from Spain in the 19th century. For their final projects, students created posters that located their family histories in the larger narrative of Colombian history.

Maribel: “Que los estudiantes sean los protagonistas” (That the Students Are the Protagonists)

Maribel, a public school teacher for more than 30 years, was the linchpin to the project’s success at ALP where she is well respected by colleagues, the administration, and students for her dedication and collaborative, collegial nature. In 2009, she began integrating readings and field assignments about CBPs in her graduate courses but had not tried them in her classes at ALP. Her primary reasons for participating as a classroom teacher were to deepen her knowledge of the community and to use this enriched vision to make the curriculum more pertinent. Happy to share her positive experiences with mapping the neighborhood and making curricular connections, Maribel seemed genuinely surprised by the potential the community resources held for curriculum development, and more importantly for students to see themselves as contributors to the vitality of their neighborhoods and “protagonists in their own learning processes” (Interview, June 2013; symposium abstract, November 2013).

In a caring, affectionate tone, Maribel describes her students as interested in and receptive to learning but who struggle with academic literacy (e.g., interpreting texts, developing coherent ideas). Many have personal academic goals and
want to live up to their families’ expectations but fear disappointing them (Initial questionnaire, May 2013). Therefore, the way to improve their language knowledge and skills is to ground the curriculum in their interests.

Maribel developed a 9-week unit on graffiti for her eighth-grade Spanish language arts class (42 students, ages 13-15), which met twice a week for 150-min blocks. 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. The two main standards addressed were as follows: “Understand and interpret texts taking into account how language functions in communicative situations, the use of reading strategies, and the role of the speaker and context” and “produce written texts demonstrating knowledge of language in communicative situations and textual production strategies” (MEN, 2006, p. 38). For the first phase, students walked around the ALP neighborhood, took pictures of the different types of graffiti that drew their attention, and emailed the photos to Maribel who converted them to PowerPoint slides to use for class discussion and initial analysis. During the second phase, Maribel invited graffiti experts and artists into the class to share the history of the medium, and to provide an overview of key techniques and symbols in the images. Bridging the second and third phases, students conducted local investigations on refranes, popular sayings, a typical part of the language/literature curricula. Maribel presented examples from the course readings (novels, short stories, etc.) and then asked the students to collect local examples from family members and ones they saw or heard in the neighborhood. After the students had created a long list of refranes, pairs of students picked one to interpret and represent in graffiti form. This became their final project: graffiti for the neighborhood. During the classroom observation in September, the students were working on their projects. They spent about 60 min in the school courtyard working on their images—painted on banners to be hung around the school and explaining the style and techniques they had chosen. Students were able to explain the type of graffiti they had chosen (“throw up; wild style,” etc.) and how the visuals of their design reflected their interpretation of the refrán. One example was “love is blind” (see Figure 2). The student-artists used several techniques reviewed in the project, and their oral presentation included the following:

The clothing indicates the couple was just married. Their kissing and hugging represents an element of “love.” However, their faces are skulls representing death that might be caused by each other along their relationship as they do not recognize how harmful that relationship may be. (Maribel, September 2013, teaching notes)

**Findings and Discussion**

These four teachers, working in a challenging urban context, developed rich curriculum projects that integrated CBPs and were able to provide thick descriptions of the student and teacher learning and insights gained. They found the workshops well-organized and mapping activity and its links to their curriculum areas extremely useful. They also found the collaborative structure key to their positive experiences. Overall, the teachers indicated that their projects increased student engagement and motivation, fostered or enhanced existing student–teacher relationships and school–family engagement, and increased student and teacher awareness and appreciation of local knowledge and its value as curriculum resource. They reported finding fewer challenges than expected and these were outweighed by the benefits. Analysis of the teachers’ definitions and enactments of the concept indicate that CBPs are flexible, offering multiple entry points and approaches to subject matter and allowing individual teachers across content and grade levels to make adaptations appropriate to their contexts and philosophies while still meeting the curriculum standards they are charged with addressing. We share the benefits, insights, and challenges teachers identified before providing a discussion of the interpretations and enactments of CBPs.

**Increased Student Engagement and Motivation**

All four teachers reported increased interest, engagement, and participation by the students. This was documented in their grade books as all included participation in their formal assessments and saw increases from previous units. Vianey (primary, social studies) described notable turnovers of
several students in danger of repeating the grade, but conducting family investigations and sharing them sparked new interest and energy in school. Colleagues and family noticed these student changes as well. “Listen, what happened to that girl? She’s raised herself another level.” “Teacher, oh, how much my son has changed!” (As reported by Vianey, Interview, November 2013).

Teresa (chemistry) and Maribel (language arts) were surprised by the students’ interest in taking, sharing, and analyzing photographs of the neighborhood, using them as starting points for their units of study. Teresa received fewer comments about boring homework and shared a telling question from a 10th grader: “Profe, porque no dicta la quimica de once” (Teacher, why aren’t you teaching eleventh-grade chemistry?).; Interview, November 2013). Marta’s (secondary, social studies) students loved investigating why/how their families came to Bogotá, and their animation in the topic was noted in the classroom observation (September, 2013). Especially noteworthy were two students who had not orally participated in class very much throughout the year, but took on more active roles in the roundtable discussion on the demographics of their barrio, sharing their indigenous roots and families’ struggles in migrating to the city. This was significant because their families were desplazados and as noted in the research by Shultz et al. (2014), this population reports high incidents of isolation in urban schools and communities. Similarly, Vianey (primary, social studies) reported an increased number of students—over the course of their 10-week unit—who voluntarily shared family stories and experiences that connected to the content. One boy excitedly shared that through the family interview assignment, he learned that his grandfather had been a soldier during the infamous siege by guerillas on the Palace of Justice in 1985 that left 98 dead, including 11 judges.

Thus, in using the local resources and realities as the starting point for curriculum, these teachers saw new, often inspiring levels of student interest and engagement in the very different subjects of chemistry, language, and history. These findings are consistent with other studies integrating community resources into school curriculum (see, for example, McInerney, Smyth, & Brown, 2011; Sobel, 2004).

**Increased Awareness and Appreciation of Local Knowledge and Its Value as Curriculum Resource**

Linked to levels of student engagement and motivation was the teachers and students’ increased awareness of and appreciation of local knowledge and its legitimate, useful role in the curriculum. The students’ engagement also reflected a new awareness of critical issues confronting their communities.

My project made me realize the advantages and disadvantages of having an auto repair and body paint shop near a kindergarten in my neighborhood. Furthermore, it helped me know the places where my classmates live, all the different classes of business here and how to help the people of the neighborhood improve their environment. (Teresa’s student, chemistry, cited in interview, November 2013)

The teachers expressed surprise at the resources they found and how easy it was to use them in addressing their content standards. In her symposium presentation, Maribel...
highlighted the implicit coherence between the linguistic mapping exercise and the national standards for language adding that graffiti deserved recognition as language arts curriculum. Furthermore, the variety of languages, registers, forms, and purposes found in/on advertisements, shop names, hand-posted notices, and so on represented a richness that made it easy for Maribel to use in addressing several standards. Similarly, Teresa (chemistry) was pleasantly surprised at the abundance of connections she and the students could make to their science studies. “The natural laboratory is here!” (Interview, November 2013).

In addition to the physical resources identified, Vianey and Marta (social studies) came to new appreciations of the local human capital and its curricular implications. Through her students’ investigations into their family’s histories and their analyses, Marta realized that she had been depending too much on books and academic journals in teaching history. In fact, the results of her students’ investigation into migration in their barrio mirrored the larger data set of the city (see Figure 3), leading Marta to exclaim, “The Colombian reality is here; it lives in these same children” (Interview, November 2013).

In her initial interview (June, 2013), Vianey shared that social studies could be monotonous, and the guiding question for her unit indicated that she had struggled in the past to make social studies relevant. Her strength as a teacher was affirming students’ identities—in interviews, the questionnaire, and her symposium presentation, she said “these children need to be heard,” but in this project, she successfully challenged herself and her students to find ways to use the analyses of their experiences to understand several major historical and current political events in Colombia. She not only reported changed attitudes of her students toward themselves, their classmates, and their families but also shared that the project helped her create a smoother, more relevant way into the study of history. It was as if in the past, she did not know how to leverage the students’ lives to facilitate their academic and cognitive engagement.

It is worth stressing that the examples shared here all use local resources as starting and not end points into areas of study appropriate to the different content areas. One of the criticisms of curriculum that values the local is its failure to link students’ learning to larger concepts or global trends (McInerney et al., 2011; Wallace, 2002). The curricula developed by these teachers do not ignore or romanticize some of the harsh realities facing their students and/or their environs, nor do they treat them as apart from legitimate subjects of study. In their report on a rich family histories project with Gujarati students and families in a Canadian school, Marshall and Toohey (2010) lamented that the parents and children saw the project “‘as something special,’ not really school” (p. 37). The parents’ initial objection to the graffiti project reflects a similar position—How can urban realities be a legitimate part of mainstream curriculum? Maribel’s realization that the linguistic/semiotic richness of local graffiti and her call for it to be included in language arts curriculum is an example of Kumashiro’s (2009) recommendation to teach standards paradoxically, that is, not only help students reach them but also critique them for what and who they include/exclude and why.

**Challenges**

The challenges the teachers identified in the project were outweighed by the benefits they named. For Marta (secondary, social studies), the principal challenge was shaking up her pedagogy. She mentioned the need to get out of her comfortable chair and “open [myself] to a new action” (November, 2013). Logistically, the main challenge was figuring out how to manage the data that the students collected so they could be combined into the larger findings on the demographics of the barrio. Teresa (chemistry) named a similar challenge, how to manage the students’ photographs. All teachers raised issues regarding students’ experiences in their fieldwork. Maribel (language arts) wondered about safety but “fortunately, nothing happened.” A few of Teresa’s students reported being concerned about taking pictures because it could make them a target for theft; she suggested they work in groups while doing this activity, and there were no negative incidents. A couple of Marta’s students reported that a few people declined to be interviewed, but that is not unusual in conducting research. Vianey was working with the youngest students and did some group field experiences. Finding the time and space to arrange these was a challenge but not insurmountable. Moreover, a couple of her students had difficulties finding time when they could interview family members because of work and/or health related problems. The parents of one of Maribel’s students questioned the academic value of studying graffiti, suggesting the topic might be condoning what they viewed as an illegal activity. However, after the

---

**Figure 3. Results of student community investigation.**
student began reporting what they were doing with the graffiti and refranes, they changed their minds.

We were remiss in not addressing safety concerns more explicitly with teachers. Increased incidents of violence in urban pockets in Colombia have raised awareness of “invisible borders” (Bustamante, 2014), the physically unmarked but known boundaries in neighborhoods with high levels of drug trafficking and gang activity. We realize the need to invite the expertise and collaboration of our non-institution of higher education (IHE) community partners (e.g., social workers, community leaders, etc.) into these community inquiry projects (Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015).

The academic challenges teachers identified were related to learning challenges that would exist in any curriculum unit—for example, how to analyze texts, synthesize data, and create an effective message, nothing that was particular to the community-based content.

**Community-Based Pedagogies Have Core Tenets But Allow Interpretation and Ownership**

In the final (November 2013) interviews, we asked “how do you define community-based pedagogies” and “how would you describe it to someone else?” The teachers’ definitions and enactments are exemplars of CBPs and meet the two main criteria in our definition: starting with the valuing of the local and addressing mandated curriculum standards. Not surprisingly, their definitions evoke tenets and principles associated with Dewey, Freire, and Moll et al., particularly funds of knowledge, experiential education, and citizenship education. The teachers’ words and works also demonstrated that CBPs are flexible enough to invite teacher autonomy and ownership, and allow multiple entry points for curriculum design and different learning trajectories for teachers and students.

Starting with their definitions, we see both commonalities and individual understandings. Vianey (primary, social studies) and Maribel (language arts) stressed that CBPs start with the students’ lives and realities: “It’s a way to integrate students’ lives into the curriculum in a realistic, humanistic manner” (Vianey). “It’s knowing where the students live and using that as a resource for learning; it’s valuing their realities outside of school” (Maribel). Thus, both teachers stressed the importance of identifying and valuing the knowledge students bring from their households and daily lives—or what Moll et al. (1992) refer to as students’ funds of knowledge.

Moreover, their deep interest in students’ lives and willingness to position students as co-investigators are consistent with Freire’s (1970/1988) notion of humanizing pedagogy (Salazar, 2013).

Teresa (chemistry) and Marta (secondary, social studies) in their comments evoke Dewey’s (1902/1990) call for experiential education, locally relevant and situated curriculum, emphasizing a mutual relationship and responsibility between school and community: “It’s pedagogy based in the community! It’s the relationship between the school and the community to support student learning—school–university partnership. It teaches students to observe and learn from their surroundings” (Teresa). “It’s active participation with the community—it’s an important symbiosis between the school and its community” (Marta).

Continuing with this community-school connection, Maribel (language arts) and Teresa (chemistry) indicated CBP’s role in citizenship education, seeing it as helping students take more active roles in shaping and defining their communities. These teachers’ statements are akin to Dewey’s (1909) notion of citizenship education whereby schools have a responsibility to help students see themselves as active, contributing members of their communities: “The child is to be a member of some particular neighborhood and community, and must contribute to the values of life . . . wherever he [sic] is” (p. 5). For Teresa, this not only included reflections on environmental impacts on their neighborhoods but also how the students’ ideas about their career paths changed due to interacting with local business owners. Students imagined themselves working in different areas of the neighborhood. Maribel challenged students to think about the kind of graffiti they would/could create to add to the identity of their neighborhood, inviting them to see themselves as creators, not just consumers of messages in their communities. Teresa and Maribel have continued this work under the umbrella of a larger initiative to foster citizenship capacities and funded by the Secretary of Education in Bogotá (T. Gomez & L.M. Ramírez, personal communication, April 8, 2015). They have included other ALP colleagues in this current project and integrated mapping and curriculum activities into their work.

In terms of starting points for enacting CBPs, Teresa (chemistry) and Maribel (language arts) began with students observing their physical environs and asking them to make connections to the target subject area. Vianey (primary, social studies) and Marta (secondary, social studies) started with human assets, asking students to interview people in their lives and then linking those experiences to national data/history. The three secondary teachers used inquiry to frame their projects, and positioned students as co-investigators into community-based curriculum, thus valuing not only students’ realities but also students’ intelligence and ability to generate local knowledge as well as identify and use it. Teresa and Maribel did not define their work as project-based, but the components and structure reflected a project-based approach. Furthermore, their projects also indicate tenets of critical pedagogies and possible interest in critical pedagogies of place (Gruenewald, 2003) because their projects ultimately challenged students to go beyond observation, share their thoughts and emotions about the observations, and then use their content-based investigations to analyze, critique, and articulate implications for their roles and connections to their local environs. The fact that the ALP teachers saw a facile alignment with the current city initiative for
schools to focus on citizenship capacities is another indication of CBP as an entry point to different pedagogical trajectories. More importantly, it addresses a pressing need identified by other Colombian education scholars. Namely, although the country has articulated a list of citizenship competencies for schools to teach, curriculum development ideas and strategies are lacking (Chaux, 2009).

Although we are informed by critical pedagogies and social justice approaches and since beginning this work have been more immersed in reading a variety of place-based/community-situated pedagogies (e.g., McInerney et al., 2011; Smith & Gruenewald, 2007; Sobel, 2004), we posited CBP as an initial entryway for teachers to begin to learn about the places their students inhabit so they could find ways to make curriculum more relevant and meaningful. Looking for assets does not mean ignoring the realities of some of our urban spaces and/or students’ lives, and we have found that for a number of pre and inservice teachers, community investigations and interactions tend to nurture critical perspectives (Sharkey & Clavijo Olarte, 2012b), and in turn, generate an interest in critical pedagogies and projects.

Limitations

The curriculum developed and enacted by these four teachers are impressive, but our study has several considerable limitations. This was a special group of veteran teachers, committed to their own professional development and improving the educational experiences and opportunities of their students. Their strengths included content knowledge expertise, curriculum development, classroom management, and critical, collaborative reflective practice. Although they shared their curriculum units, grade books, sample student products, and classroom reflections, the evidence of student learning and engagement is principally based on their self-reports. A similar project, approved for 2016, will include a more robust and systematic analysis of student work.

Conclusion

This school–university endeavor has reinforced our commitment to working with teachers in their contexts as co-creators of knowledge and co-investigators in pursuing pressing issues, and to SJTJE as collaborative effort. We opened with questions regarding how and where teachers learn to bridge relational gaps—between themselves and their students, students and curriculum—and gaps that have been exacerbated by restrictive policies and shifting demographics. We had advocated CBP but our teacher learners’ valid questions about their practicality in difficult contexts warranted attention, which led to this formalized inquiry. We never sought to develop a prescribed curriculum and were not quite sure what the end products would look like or what teachers and/or their students might find valuable. However, watching and learning from the ALP teachers’ processes deepened our notions of CBPs, showing that teachers in challenging contexts can do this work and their processes, insights, and products are already inspiring our teacher learners in the United States and Colombia. A powerful example comes from Rosita, our main research assistant who was pursuing her master’s in the applied linguistics program:

Before the project I was mostly hopeless about public education in my city. Seven years ago, as a student teacher in a public school I knew about overcrowded classrooms, dangerous neighborhoods and lack of materials. I thought it was almost impossible to have good teaching practices in communities full of social injustice and dangers to the students . . . [T]he project opened my eyes to possibilities and hope in urban schools. (Personal communication, April 2015)

Much work remains to be done, and next steps include broadening participation to other sites, involving more teacher learners and more systematic inquiry into effects of CBPs on student learning. We believe successful learning of CBPs for teachers requires an asset-based, situated approach to their contexts and content, one that balances appropriate support with professional autonomy and creativity. However, integral to teachers’ development of CBP seems to be our experiential, situated approach, which involved accompanying teachers on physical explorations and discussions of their school’s surrounding barrios and then, explicitly, intentionally juxtaposing specific standards to their observations and inviting their professional expertise and creativity into the process. If we ask teachers to value their students’ worlds, realities, and funds of knowledge, we must do the same with our teacher colleagues and learners.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The project was funded by the Center for Research and Scientific Development at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. Project#4-62-304-12.

Note

1. Pseudonyms were not used at the request of the participants.

References


Downloaded from jte.sagepub.com by guest on June 28, 2016


Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets. Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research.


**Author Biographies**

**Judy Sharkey** is associate professor in the Education Department at the University of New Hampshire. Informed by critical sociocultural learning theories and pedagogies, her research and teaching interests include teacher and student learning in multilingual/pluricultural urban communities.

**Amparo Clavijo Olarte** is professor in the MA in Applied Linguistics Program at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia. Her research focuses on developing critical literacy practices with teachers and students and the research practices of teachers. She is the founder and editor of Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal.

**Luz Maribel Ramírez** teaches English and Spanish language arts at Institución Educativa Alfonso López Pumarejo, Bogotá, Colombia. She is a former lecturer in the MA in Applied Linguistics Program at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia. As a practitioner-researcher she focuses on critical literacies and community-based pedagogies.