Mapping Literacy, Mapping Lives: Teachers Exploring the Sociopolitical Context of Literacy and Learning

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In this article the authors explore a language and literacy community mapping project carried out by public school teachers in southern California. They chronicle the knowledge produced by teachers about the depth and diversity of language and literacy resources present in the neighborhoods surrounding their various urban school sites.

...we must work with youth to become agents of change in their community before “all the old warriors are gone” (Joe, fieldnotes, May 2010)

In his reflective writings, this teacher offers an analysis of the words spoken by a community activist in an interview he conducted with her near his school site. In his written reflections Joe ponders the role educators, families and community institutions can play “so young people can have an impact and voice in their community on issues of their own volition.” In addition to interviewing community members, Joe also investigates the abundance of visual literacy surrounding his school community—such as murals, traditional print in various languages, and even graffiti—and notes that “students can access a wealth of information through these types of literacy and art forms without having to navigate through hidden language barriers or borders.” For this teacher, and many others, developing a stronger understanding of and appreciation toward local resources and community systems—including social, political, economic, and linguistic assets—is an essential element of creating a literacy curriculum that is relevant to the lives of students both inside and outside the classroom.

In Education and Experience, John Dewey (1938) criticizes traditional education for lacking in holistic understanding of students and designing curricula overly focused on isolated sets of skills rather than the knowledge that can be derived through content, process, and one’s interaction with, and knowledge of, their environment. Over 70 years later the debate continues over the role of context—specifically the local everyday realities and multicultural and linguistic words and worlds of children—in teacher instruction and student learning.

Progressive educators and critical theorists have called for a new pedagogy where “students and their life experiences are a curriculum in constant interaction with teachers who can help them question and explore who they are and what has gone before” (Raynolds, as cited in Freire, 1993, p. 11). According to these theorists, it is the responsibility of the educator to understand the unique and ever-changing dynamics of their surrounding school communities in order to meaningfully create educational experiences that will have a positive impact on students’ present realities and future aspirations.

In this article we explore a language and literacy community mapping project carried out by teachers in southern California. Our goal in conducting this study was to chronicle the knowledge produced by teachers about the depth and diversity of language and literacy resources in the neighborhoods surrounding their various urban school sites. Schools are located in dynamic, ever changing communities with both socio-political-historical legacies and contemporary resources. As such, community language and literacy mapping is an inquiry-based method that can be utilized by teachers to place literacy learning in context by connecting students’ life realities to school instruction. For many educators, community mapping can also promote increased interactions among teachers and communities by removing potential cultural barriers and unearthing cultural and linguistic assets. According to O’Sullivan (2001), mapping the community surrounding the school by taking photos/videos, observing the neighborhood, writing field notes, and interacting with the people who work and live in the area should allow teachers to “see” the needs and resources of a community with new lenses (p. 1). Armed with this knowledge, teachers should be able to develop curricula that are relevant and meaningful to students' lives.
can develop the critical knowledge necessary to create literacy instruction that encourages students to act upon the multiple social worlds in which they inhabit.

Theoretical Framework: A Sociopolitical View of Literacy and Learning

According to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1993), “It is not possible to think of language without thinking of the social world we constitute” (p. 41). Approached from this sociocultural perspective, literacy educators would emphasize the children’s homes and communities as places where learning and literacy emerge. It includes a dynamic view of how culture, language, social interaction, social practices, and one’s environment mediate literacy and learning (Vygotsky, 1978), while taking into consideration various representations of ideas that reflect broad habits of mind as well as multiple perspectives (Gee, 1996).

Paulo Freire also believed that literacy skills are not only functional in society, but are the essential tools to critically analyze the dialogical relationship among words and worlds, knowledge and power, and between ideology and practice. In contrast, much of the literacy instruction found in schools today is often de-contextualized from the multicultural worlds of students and their families. Too often, schools adopt reading curricula that are prescriptive and rationalized in a way that privileges schooled literacy over community-based literacy practices, including visual literacy forms (Auerbach, 2001; Ordoñez–Jasis, 2010; Ordoñez–Jasis, Flores & Jasis, 2010; Taylor, 2010). As a result, cultural literacies within the community tend to remain within a “marginalized public sphere” (Giroux, 1983). If taken seriously, these alternative literacy forms would otherwise help to enhance strong cultural competencies and a social awareness within students while building essential literacy skills (Gay, 2000). Indeed, educators should heed Genishi and Dyson’s (2009) warning that there is “a very puzzling contrast—really an awesome disconnect—between the breathtaking diversity of school children and the uniformity, homogenization, and regimentation of classroom practices from kindergarten onward” (p. 4). Fortunately, research suggests that when there is an increased effort by schools to learn about, and build upon, the multiple ways in which communities use literacy outside school, children maintain, and even increase, the gains made during formal literacy instruction (Paratore, 2003).

The stance toward appreciation and inclusion of community resources to contextualize literacy instruction often involves a reflection and investigation of what assets are validated and accepted, by whom, and under what contexts. It is intertwined with the teacher’s emerging realization that, by incorporating community language and literacies into their pedagogy, they are increasingly becoming agents of educational and social change (Jasis, 2000). Community mapping is one approach that can be used by educators to assist in this critical investigation.

Mapping Language and Literacy Resources

Community mapping is a term used to describe both a “process and a product” (Tredway, 2003, p. 1). Community mapping is a process of discovery and reflection that allows the “mapper” to develop new understandings about a specific geographical area. As part of this process, one also collects as “products” important cultural/historical artifacts and documents. Mapping also includes the documentation—through field notes and photos or videos—of recollections/observations and interactions with community informants. In specialized fields such as sociology, urban planning, and environmental science to name a few, community mapping has been shown to build knowledge and awareness of community assets, needs, and historical/demographic trends (Tindle, Leconte, Buchanan & Taymans, 2005). Within the field of education, community mapping has been utilized to address the full context of school and community. Tredway (2003) describes community mapping as an inquiry-based method that has the potential to change the perspective of the teacher from one of an outsider to that of an insider, particularly when the lived realities and experiences of community members are taken into account.

For literacy educators, community mapping can serve as a reflective tool to create purposeful learning situations which validate the diverse experiential and symbolic cultural and linguistic resources children bring with them to the classroom (O’Sullivan, 2001; Tindle et al., 2005). Genishi and Dyson’s (2009) ethnographic work in multicultural classrooms reminds us that by becoming better observers of their students, both within and outside the classroom, teachers are better able to respond to their literacy growth, and make more relevant their literacy curriculum. Luis Moll’s work (see Moll & Gonzalez, 2004) has informed those researchers and educators concerned with this type of meaning-driven literacy instruction. In particular, his research on “funds of knowledge” has helped to frame teachers’ ethnographic work, including their observations and documentation of how students and community members attach meaning to language and literacy practices. By conceptualizing community members’ relationship to literacy in this way—in terms of the diverse ways it is experienced, represented, and created—educators are able to situate literacy learning within a richer understanding of their students’ contemporary social context.
New understandings gained from locating language and literacy resources may also broaden our understanding of literacy instruction so we may also approach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing as permeated by social and political issues (Gee, 1996). In this regard, community mapping can lead us to question our own long-held beliefs about historically marginalized communities and, possibly, to interrogate asymmetrical power relations and social injustices in society and within schools (Darder, 1991). Consequently, as Moll (2010) has written, educators have the political power to determine “whose language and cultural experiences count and whose do not, which students are at the center, and therefore, which must remain in the periphery” (p. 454). Recognition of the cultural capital of diverse communities, including potential literacy assets, is a first step toward centralizing the voices of its members and integrating them into the “social and intellectual fabric” of schools (Moll, 2010, p. 454). In a very Freirian sense, as teachers engage in a collective analysis of power, language, literacy and access within schools and society, vis-a-vis community language and literacy mapping, a deeper understanding may develop of how literacy, as a pedagogical tool, can be used by both teachers and students to derive meaning from, and later learn to “act” upon, one’s environment.

Methods

The Context

In general, the participants took part in this community language and literacy mapping project to better understand the experiences of teachers who attempted to uncover the language and literacy resources of the communities surrounding their urban school sites. Our aim in conducting this study was to first understand how the process of mapping the literacy and language resources of diverse communities—within various social-cultural-historical-political contexts—impacts or informs teachers’ production of knowledge. Second, we wanted to investigate what, if any, were the implications for teacher practice. Using their own students’ communities as settings for study and critical analysis, the participants were enrolled in a graduate-level course and carried out, as part of course requirements, a teacher inquiry project that required them to map the cultural, linguistic and literacy “geographies” (Moll, 2010, p. 454) of their school communities. Graduate students individually scouted, tabulated, and videotaped/photographed language and literacy resources. In order to gain deeper understandings of community resources, teachers were required to informally interview at least one community informant as part of their research. This community mapping activity was followed by an online class assignment where students were asked to engage in active thought and inquiry as they posted, and then discussed, their reflections on both the content and process of their mapping experience.¹

Data Collection Procedures

Fifteen teachers participated in a semester-long community language and literacy mapping project. All teachers were graduate students in a course the researcher taught at a university located in southern California. The course, which focused on the sociocultural and political contexts of literacy and learning, required that students gain experience conducting community ethnographic qualitative research. Although the assignment was required of all students enrolled in the course, inclusion of their submitted work as part of this study was voluntary. Teacher participants included 10 elementary school teachers, one long-term substitute teacher, one middle school teacher, one resource specialist, one high school teacher, and one community college instructor. Fourteen participants were educators who taught in public schools in the Los Angeles Metropolitan area. One teacher taught in a neighboring county. Each teacher used his/her own school site for the community mapping project. Of the 15 school sites investigated, 14 represented the diverse geographic demographics of Los Angeles’ inner cities, urban areas, and suburban neighborhoods. Although Southern California residents include a cross-section of different cultures and ethnicities, all participating teachers taught at school sites that served primarily Latino families. However, the school locations were representative of the heterogeneity found in the diverse Latino community. Participant teachers’ school sites differed in terms of socioeconomic status, recent immigrants and U.S.-born residents, language use (English/Spanish), educational attainment, and household compositions.

The key modes of data collection included participants’ voluntary submission of their field work journals. These journals contained teachers’ documented observations, transcribed interviews with community informants, and written reflections. Although the majority (11 out of 15) of the teachers were Latino/a, English/Spanish bilingual, and shared a historical working class and/or immigrant legacy with their school communities investigated, differences due to social class, educational attainment, and lived realities in general, existed. Indeed, Tredway (2003) reminds us that even when teachers and students share the same cultural or linguistic background, “both generational and class issues can collide with the students

¹For information regarding the specific assignment description, send queries to Dr. Rosario Ordoñez–Jasis.
and the community, resulting in different kinds of presumptions and barriers” (p. 5). To address this issue, participants were requested to maintain a separate section of their journal so they may record any new findings or discoveries that questioned their previous understandings about the community. Through this on-going process of critically re-examining and reinterpreting their own knowledge and experiences, we believe participants were able to enter the community with new lenses. Data collection also included electronic submissions of photos or videos captured in the community and participants’ responses to an online class discussion. The online activity was conducted at the conclusion of the project.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using Carney, Joiner, and Tragous’ (1997) approach to sorting data. The primary researcher for this project—who was the professor in the graduate class to which this community mapping was assigned—first coded the teacher descriptive observational data, interview transcriptions, and reflective essays to illuminate key emergent themes and patterns. Next, the second researcher coded the same data and any inconsistencies were noted. A table was created by the second researcher to further organize the themes and identify their significance. This last level of analysis allowed for a deeper knowledge of the data. The three themes that emerged from the data include how teachers discovered deeper meanings in diverse literacy forms, critically interrogated notions of needs and resources, and began to view literacy as a pedagogical tool.

Teacher participants were requested to reflect upon their mapping experiences and to describe significant discoveries. For this study, we were particularly interested in prompted reflection using the data they collected as part of their mapping experience as the prompts. Analysis of these teachers’ written reflections allowed us to capture the new knowledge and insights produced and better understand how this new knowledge facilitated their understanding of instructional practice in the area of literacy.

Findings

Discovering Deeper Meanings in Diverse Literacy Forms: “Certain Street Corners are Just Dripping in Text”

All participating teachers, including those who had reported having in-depth knowledge about their various school communities, reported that the community mapping project removed cultural and linguistic barriers and allowed them to view language and literacy through new lenses. Heather, a participating teacher, wrote:

At first I had no idea where I would find language and literacy resources, but once I had my camera out it was everywhere. I first noticed all of the street stands where you could get literature like newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines in English and Spanish. Then I noticed this pet shop that had such visually stimulating images (see Figure 1), listing the names of exotic birds which I thought would help students be exposed to new vocabulary... there were certain street corners that were just dripping in text.

As this teacher assessed the deeper meaning of her community findings, her submission also indicated a reappreciation of the artifacts and processes she witnessed and registered. Through this process, her sense of mapping was transformed from simply creating an inventory of fungible, useful resources, toward engaging in an archival quest for community-produced text with pedagogical and linguistic significance. Her discovery process was also shared by other participants, as they chronicled and examined their findings.

In another section of her submission Heather would later reflect on her school demographics, where 99% of students were Latino, 90% were designated English Language Learners and 96% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. She described the following:

there are many cultures represented (in my school community)... However only 2 out of 12 teachers share a similar cultural background with their students and all but one commute into the community each day... I think it's hard for them to be aware of how the decisions they make can so drastically impact their student’s performance. They too can benefit from more time in the community.

In a school where an overwhelming majority are second language learners, Heather’s complex assessment of the value of community engagement by teachers
called here for a deeper, strategic understanding of the students’ bilingual/bicultural identities and socio-cultural environment and its connections to school performance.

Fatima, another participant teacher, discovered the socio-historical-political literacy value of an overlooked city mural. She shared this aspect of her community mapping, stating:

The mural found down the street made the most impact on me because I never knew the significance of it . . . the people in this neighborhood rioted against the police department because of police brutality. The department was found guilty and was ordered to improve its relations with the community; hence, they hired (an artist) to paint the mural . . . upon reflection, I appreciate the community and the parents for their hard work so that their children will have a bright future. Now I can confidently suggest many resources that I did not once know about and will use the mural as a history lesson . . .

In her reflections, the community’s history—expressed through visual literacy—became a treasured resource with profound pedagogical meanings. Her approach mirrors the notion of “community of memory” advanced by Belah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) which advocates that teachers purposefully engage students with the community’s history and its hidden voices. Through their approach, the need to articulate pedagogies that see aesthetic and literary exploration within a cultural context is viewed as the core of the educational mission.

A similar process of re-appreciation of expressions of popular art was apparent in the findings of Lorena (see Figure 2), who excitedly relayed discovering:

. . . types of resources previously overlooked. I captured buildings with banners hanging from the roofs that read, “Legalize LA” and “Immigration Reform” providing important messages to the public. Murals depicting skid row experiences are also prominent in the area, showing the many faces of homelessness. These types of language and literacy forms are very important because they serve as a form of communication, providing awareness through letters, pictures, paintings, and images.

Through her reflections, this teacher established a clear connection between the socio-political contexts of the students’ lives framed by the community’s history, and their pedagogical potential. The murals depicting homelessness and community resistance became, in the words of Vanni (2010), sites where art literacy “entangles with everyday life, embodies and makes visible the blueprint of their everyday social and cultural context” (p. 4). Lorena also explored the intersection between politics and literacy on issues that directly impact the lives of Latino families, such as immigration reform. Similarly, Amalia elaborated on the significance of the socio-political messaging embedded in many of these literacy forms found in her own community mapping experience. She explained:

. . . I also found so much literacy that can create a political awareness . . . it helps parents as well as students learn about their community, it keeps them informed about current events and politics . . . we need to make sure we connect them to what we teach them at school on a daily basis.

In the words of Freire (1998), their approach would be at the core of a critical pedagogical stance, one in which the role of the teacher is precisely to explore with students a “critical reflection of social or natural events” (p. 30) and then to “assent the students’ right to compare, to choose, to rupture, to decide” (p. 68).

Teachers’ Challenging the Notions of Needs and Resources: “Understanding the Language and Literacy Resources of this Community Depends on One’s Perspective.”

One of the most salient aspects of the teacher narratives throughout this project was an undercurrent of thought that questioned prevailing notions about the meaning of literacy resources and needs. At the beginning of the project, the participants held a narrower view of what constituted a community resource, generally ascribing to prevailing views of resources as related to wealth, institutional offerings and programs, material goods or opportunities, which were often seen as scarce or non-existent in the urban environments where they worked. Conversely, they generally perceived the concept of needs as defined by the lack of those same material resources at the local level. Over time, however, and by pushing themselves to view the local context through the lens of
the residents who live and work in the local communities, these teachers began to problematize these concepts, while articulating their own definitions throughout the community mapping process. As one example, Claudia, who teaches in the downtown section of Los Angeles (see Figure 3), explained how “many of the students and their families live in the missions, transient housing, and hotel rooms. These children are fearful as they walk by homeless men and women on the streets.” Yet, she continues, “I have chosen to use this as an opportunity to teach children about empathy and more. We have talked about the possible reasons why they are living under those circumstances.” Her submission, as well as the reflections of her colleagues, denotes an emerging social justice pedagogical orientation impacted by her new reading of the students’ context. This pedagogy aimed at not only promoting empathy among students but also developing critical inquiry skills and building necessary connections between students, the curriculum, and broader society. Thus, through these teachers’ pedagogy and consistent with their emerging problem-posing orientation, the issues of homelessness and urban poverty in this context began to transcend the boundaries of basic human empathy to also provide an opportunity for teacher and student inquiry, community and classroom-based research, literacy activities, and social action.

As the process of community mapping was implemented, new perspectives began to emerge among the teachers that positioned their views about the lives of the students’ and their families in a more complex light. Teachers started questioning their initial perceptions of the area. Where they often saw urban decay and despair, they now discovered sources of struggle and hope, community history, individual and community talent and expression, personal resiliency and strength, and even a sense of beauty among the concrete landscapes of freeway overpasses. Melissa reflects upon her experience in this way (see Figure 4):

Understanding the language and literacy resources of this community depends on one’s perspective. The families that live in the community near the school would say that (our school) is safe and great place for their children to get an education. On the other hand, those who are not familiar with our school and its philosophy would say that it is a terrible place for a school location . . .

As an example of her new approach to pedagogy, she adds:

The historic bridge is a good way to teach about geometric shapes, force, and motion . . . The local varieties found in the nearby flower and produce marts can be easily integrated into my science and health nutrition lessons while providing students with first hand learning experiences (see Figure 5).
Through their submissions, the teachers made a point not to minimize or romanticize their students and their families’ daily struggles. In fact, their emerging pedagogical stance seeks to overtly explore and question those socio-economic conditions with their students and turn their classroom deliberations into sources of literacy and instruction. To emphasize these emerging dispositions and the importance of examining text, one teacher’s submission includes her thoughts about the life of children surrounded by signs that warn “no trespassing,” “no loitering,” “we report suspicious crimes” posted in what she refers to as “certain parks” and other areas of her economically segregated school community (see Figure 6). She expressed the belief that by critically interrogating the negative connotation of the signs with her students, she will open an inclusive conversation in the classroom about the discriminatory nature of access to resources in the area.

**Literacy as a Pedagogical Tool: “... Literacy can be Such a Powerful Medium for Change ...”**

The community mapping project ignited a collective spark of creative energy among the participating teachers, who through their individual reflections and online discussions envisioned a myriad of opportunities for community-inspired literacy and learning with their students. One of these entries reflected this burst of inspiration:

Many of my students have told me that they are concerned with how dirty the streets are. Since we’ve discussed how visual literacy can be such a powerful medium for change, I thought we could create banners using both words and images and post them around the school to remind the public to keep our streets clean. This way they will feel good about creating a better environment... 

Growing concern about the impact of the troubled economy on their students’ families, their lives, and their academic prospects were also noted in many of the teacher entries. For example, Natalie, shared her concern about budget cuts and the diminishing resources in the area, such as the public library which provides family literacy events, access to computers, and after-school homework assistance. Upon reading Natalie’s post online, her colleague Karen, reflected on how the economy is impacting student learning in her district, stating:

Due to the economy, our community is also struggling to maintain basic resources that were once taken for granted—an intact public school year, adult basic education, a public library, and a state park. For those who most need public resources, they’re dwindling.

To address their concerns, Nancy and Karen together envisioned a campaign involving their students in letter-writing and public presentations at civic forums to describe the benefits of expanding public library hours. In Natalie’s words, “This would be a great way to unite the school community for a great cause while integrating reading, writing, and presenting skills.” Both participant teachers indicated through this experience how their community literacy mapping helped them guide their students toward inquiry, social commitment, and participation, articulating their pedagogy while promoting civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

The community literacy mapping project provided teachers with a participatory forum to discover a wealth of resources at the grassroots level to reflect on and to strengthen their classroom-based pedagogies. The participants engaged in a re-appreciation of the cultural artifacts, history, institutions, and artistic expressions that a community can offer. With it, and through this transforming process, they also learned to validate and incorporate their school community’s life into a more effective instruction with all its vibrancy and pedagogic possibilities.

In an increasingly diverse and changing world, this experience invited teachers to reflect upon their dispositions and practice so they may recognize the complexities of literacy learning. This was an effort that involved teachers in a concerted, inquiry-based approach to understand the words and worlds of the students in their classrooms. Thus, while a cultural identification between students and teachers is important and clearly supports the process, for teachers of any ethnicity there is a need for a cultural disposition that allows for learning and understanding of their young students’ cultural and familial contexts and experiences. More importantly, we found that the teachers’ shared affirmation of the right of their students to be educated within a curriculum that fosters their complex, bicultural, and biliterate identities was critical in articulating their voice and their ability to teach with an overt, strong literacy development focus.
with an added capacity to be responsive to the needs of all children.

References


