Linking Community Literacies to Critical Literacies

through Community Language and Literacy Mapping

Abstract

This paper describes how a group of teachers engaged in Community Language and Literacy mapping to understand the languages and literacies present in their communities and in turn create critical literacies units for diverse elementary students in urban, rural, and suburban schools. The teachers documented community languages and literacies via ethnographic methods. Through the project the teachers broadened their view of what counts as literacy, deepened their understanding of critical literacies, and used community language and literacy practices in their classroom teaching.

Key words: community literacy, critical literacy, teacher education

A pervasive question in literacy teacher preparation and development has been how to effectively train and develop teachers for an increasingly diverse student population, a population that is typically different from the teachers themselves (Anders, Hoffman & Duffy, 2000; Dozier, Johnston, Rogers, 2006; Koerner & Abdul-Tawwab, 2006). Teachers often view historically marginalized communities as full of barriers to school language and literacy learning rather than as *funds of knowledge* (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) or sources of important resources of languages and literacies for their students and for the curriculum. Yet successful teachers place increasing importance on multiple ways of knowing and doing (Haberman, 2011), including utilizing students' communities as vital resources for teaching and learning. These same teachers strive to develop culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012) that connect academic instruction with languages, literacies, and knowledges children bring from their own experiences (Au & Kawakami, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Ladson Billings, 1994). One method that has been used with increasing success to assist teachers in understanding students' experiences and environments is community mapping.

Community Language and Literacy Mapping

Community Mapping is a process of uncovering the resources in a given area or community. It is an inquiry based data collection and communication tool used internationally in various fields to identify community assets and capacities, including data such as languages, art, literacies, networks and opportunities (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Jackson & Bryson, 2018). In education, community mapping has been used with educators to uncover deficit thinking and bias about students and

communities (Fox, 2014; Jackson & Bryson, 2018; Treadway, 2003), to contextualize

learning in a particular school and community (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Ordoñez-Jasis &

Jasis, 2011), and to broaden teachers' views of pedagogy and instruction (Dunsmore,

Ordoñez-Jasis, & Herrera, 2013).

In their study of early childhood preservice teachers, Jackson and Bryson (2018)

examined how Culturally Responsive Pedagogy was manifested in 21 future educators'

learning through a community mapping project. All of their participants were women and

the majority were white. They found that the community mapping project helped

uncover the participants' biases and deficit thinking, especially pertaining to race and

socioeconomic status. In addition, the preservice teachers appeared to broaden their ideas

of what it means to be a teacher, of the importance of understanding students' lived

experiences, and that teachers should be engaged in their communities. Their findings

suggest that engaging in community mapping can increase preservice teachers'

understandings of the context where their students live as well as provide important

nuanced contexts of the communities in which they teach. While Jackson and Bryson

(2018) did not have their preservice teachers engage with students and families in the

community, they found the community mapping exercise to be an important and

meaningful tool for developing culturally responsive pedagogies.

In a similar study with practicing teachers, Fox (2014) noted that documenting

additive community resources is one way to shake up and reverse the deficit myths about

low income or language learners. In her study in the southeastern United States in a

graduate program in literacy, in-service teachers participated in literacy mapping and

imagined they were following similar routes to school as their students. They surveyed

urban, suburban, and rural areas and found the mapping exercise as a valuable way to understand the multiple views of literacies in the community. Disparities in resource distribution between urban and rural areas were made evident, such as an abundance of materials in the store in the suburban area and a dearth of materials in that same chain store in the lower socioeconomic neighborhood. Teachers were able to see the literacy resources and the gaps in their communities, albeit they relied on traditional definitions of literacy materials such as books, signs, marketing materials, flyers, and the like. This study also led to action – some examples include the creation of a resource guide to the community, one teacher developed an "adopt a library" plan for her school to implement more library access, and another example included summer grant funding was granted to keep some school libraries open during the summer.

While some of the aims and approaches are very similar, Community Mapping is distinct from a *funds of knowledge* approach (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) in that teachers were not asked to go into households nor were households viewed as central to the data collected. Instead, in Community Mapping, teachers were asked to carefully examine the linguistic and literate signs, features, and practices in the communities in which they teach in order to "read the world" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 35) and to better understand their students' worlds and incorporate them into literacy teaching.

In this study, we used community mapping techniques to collect and analyze data on the languages and literacies that were present in the communities surrounding nine teachers' schools. Then utilizing these data, teachers designed critical literacy units of study for their students in response to what they found. A central goal of the exercise was for teachers to reject deficit views of their students' communities and to instead

notice and document the various language and literacy resources in their school

communities. During and after their mapping work, teachers were to incorporate their

findings into critical literacy units they would teach their students. In this inquiry-based

professional development project, teachers engaged in Community Languages and

Literacies mapping through ethnographic data collection techniques including:

- Spending time observing the neighborhood and area around their school while

  paying particular attention to languages and literacies

- Documenting the languages and literacies they saw on billboards, advertisements,

  signs through various methods including field notes, photos, audio/video

  recording and sketches

- Recording how often they found a particular language or literacy practice

- Interviewing a community member to gain "insider" knowledge into the language

  and literacy practices of the community

Methodology

This is the study of a group of practicing teachers who used a Community

Literacies and Languages Mapping approach to inform their literacy instruction for

culturally and linguistically diverse students. The nine teachers, all women, were

graduate students pursuing a Master's in Reading at a large public Hispanic Serving

Institution in Texas. The mapping project and critical literacy units were required

assignments in a graduate level multicultural literacy course. The teachers varied in age

from early twenties to late forties; the majority were white, middle class, with one self-

identifying as Black and two self-identifying as Latina. The teachers worked in different

districts, schools, and preschools in the area, ranging from urban, inner city schools to

suburban and even rural areas. They were at various stages in their careers ranging from novice (under three years experience) to experienced teachers (fifteen years experience or more). Overall the teachers in this project reflect the nationwide statistics of the teaching force in regards to gender, age, and ethnicity.

As the instructor for the course, my objectives were to disrupt the often negative views teachers may have had about the communities their students lived in and to provide increased opportunities for interaction with diverse groups and build relationships (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000) within their own school communities. As one of the teachers said, "This ethnographic approach to mapping the community was more concerned with attempting to understand the linguistic development and practices in the community than with trying to discover **correct** ways for learning language and literacy acquisition." In fact, "correct" ways of language and literacy was not something the course focused on, but traditionally education has treated learners' lives, cultures, knowledges and literacies as a blank slate, with official views of knowledge and literacy as the only legitimate ways of knowing (Luke & Woods, 2009). As a result, drawing on community literacies is sometimes seen as out of place in schools and is becoming increasingly uncommon in this era of scripted curricula and high stakes testing (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

As an extension of their mapping projects, I sought to push teachers to build critical literacy units based on the data they collected, in hopes that their literacy teaching would take on a deeper dimension and broaden the teachers' notions of what counts as texts and literacies (Dozier, Johnston, Rogers, 2006). I wanted to inculcate in the teachers the value of learning about their communities to better understand their students'

experiences, building on what students know, and using that knowledge to engage in culturally sustaining literacy instruction (Paris, 2012). Although I had taught this course for several years and had used a variation of this assignment each year, this was the first time I documented and analyzed the teachers' responses and engagement in the process. For this qualitative study I asked,

- How does Community Literacy and Language Mapping contribute to teachers' professional learning and conceptions of literacy?

- In what ways do teachers incorporate students' lived literacies into their literacy teaching through critical literacy units of study?

To answer these questions I collected class discussion notes, mapping projects and reflections, critical literacy unit projects and reflections as well as overall course reflections. Data was analyzed using case study and emergent theme data analysis strategies (Creswell, 1998). Throughout the course of study, I assumed an iterative approach by cycling back and forth between data collection and analysis. In the preliminary stages, I began the analysis with an open coding scheme according to Strauss and Corbin (1998). Through open coding, I identified potential themes by culling out examples from participant observations, interviews and written responses. All data was broken into data chunks and grouped by emerging themes. When concepts and categories developed that were similar, typologies were created according to a three-step process outlined by Berg (2004). First, I assessed the data and categories or themes that emerged. Then, I made sure that all the elements were accounted for. Finally, I examined the categories and their contents and drew conclusions from these categories.

Findings

I have taught at this school for almost three years now and I have never

really looked at the community. I feel that I am very dedicated to my job

and I care deeply for the development of my students, but as I realize

while completing this project, I've never really taken a look at what the

world looks like and means to my students. I'm realizing now that I have

made some assumptions about what life is like for them, even though I

promised myself that I would never do that when I became a teacher. This

project played a role in helping to break those assumptions and give me a

more accurate view of my students' lives.

Jessica wrote this in her reflective letter to me after completing the

mapping project and critical literacies unit. We discussed the project in class and

most of the teachers had similar experiences. The careful and systematic process

of mapping language and literacies enabled teachers to see the communities in

which they worked with different eyes. When teachers take on a learner's stance,

to examine the community resources, school curriculums can be enhanced

(Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007).

In the field of literacy, particularly critical literacy and multiliteracies, there has

been a call to "read the world" in order to "read the word" (Freire & Macedo, 1987;

Barton, 1994). Additionally, scholars stress the importance of considering local

community practices in order to better devise effective and relevant literacy curricula

(Street, 1995; Comber & Simpson, 2001). Some call these community literacies "lived

literacies", that is the languages, literacies, and symbols present in the students' daily

lives (Bausch, 2003; Dozier, Johnston, Rogers, 2006; Vasquez, 2003).

In literacy teaching, we have long used environmental print as a starting point

with young children learning to read and write (McGee, 1986). But after children have

acquired literacy in the early grades, the environment and larger context of literacy

learning is often left out of the literacy curriculum. Christine, one of the teachers who

participated in this project, offered a possible explanation:

> When I drive to work or go on a walk with my family I often tend to
>
> overlook the literacy present in the community. I know where the stop
>
> signs are, but never pay close enough attention to read them. I look past
>
> the house numbers and street signs. I see the yellow realtor's sign or a
>
> house for sale in the neighborhood but I don't read it, I assume I know
>
> what it says. When I walk down the street to get my mail from one of the
>
> large mailbox stations I put my key into the exact keyhole everyday
>
> without even reading which unit number it is. I am a literate person and I
>
> have read all these signs and things before, but on a daily basis I simply
>
> overlook a lot of the literacy in my community.

Christine's statement resonates with what Jessica said in the opening vignette.

Sometimes as teachers we don't notice the everyday literacies of our students. We have

become so accustomed to the literacies around us that we begin to tune them out.

Perhaps because of this, many teachers expressed concern regarding the project in the

beginning. Some shared that they didn't think they would find enough visible literacies

in their communities to complete the project. Christine, who lived in a rural area,

described her initial feelings this way,

> I was very anxious because I kept thinking there is no literacy in Marion.
>
> When I started to pay attention I did start to see it but I had to look VERY
>
> CLOSELY. If I didn't keep my eyes open I would miss an empty Bill
>
> Miller's [BarBQ restaurant] cup on the side of the road, the Super S
>
> grocery store bag that is caught in a fence, the small sign that says Marion
>
> Bowling Club on the side of the building, or even the changeable white
>
> community signs located in different areas of town.

Christine's initial statement that there "is no literacy" in her community shows both this

tendency to overlook the familiar as well as a deficit or narrow view of what counts as

literacy. The examples she gave of eventually finding literacy are also tied to traditional

notions of literacy. But because local languages and literacies can and should be used as

resources for language and literacy learning, a major goal of this project was to facilitate

a more astute ability to read the world in the teachers and to open up their definitions of

literacy. Through this project I sought to extend teachers' collective sense of the

literacies present in our world and the worlds of our students (Rush, 2003).

Jessica, who worked in a suburban area and initially thought finding literacies in

her community was easy as she drove past strip malls and a myriad of stores and

restaurants, reflected on the experience and how she began to expand her understanding

of literacy.

> I saw plenty of children running around and playing with each other, but
>
> not one group of students (or even a single student) had a book in their

hand or was writing a story down in a notebook. I feel that I was sort of

stuck on the more obvious definitions of literacy activities and had trouble

locating anything else. I'll admit that I had to drive around a few times

before I really started noticing what was around me. When I couldn't find

the more obvious signs of literacy activities, I tried to think of the types of

things my students would pay attention to or would have to interpret to be

able to live there. For example, the neighborhood park that's a few blocks

down from my school has a list of rules and expectations that need to be

followed for the kids to be able to play their safely. Once I noticed that

sign, I think I started looking at the neighborhood in a different way. I

noticed the street signs that the kids would have to be able to use to be

able to get to their friends' houses, and all the for sale signs on the houses

that might have told them that their friends would be moving away or new

friends could be moving in. I also took a closer look at the environmental

print inside the many apartment complexes that we get students from.

They had message boards that were covered with notices, for sale signs,

and posters. It started to become very clear to me how much print my

students are surrounded with and have to interpret on a daily basis.

The idea that literacies may be present in a particular community but open to

interpretation, that students might have different ways of interacting with print than we

might initially think, opened up a new way of thinking about literacies for many of the

teachers. They began to discuss ways that students see and take on various literacies and

how school practices may not always reflect or value the experiences and points of view

of the students. Teachers began to reflect on their narrow views of literacy and how

closely examining their communities helped them embrace additional literacies.

Another teacher, Erin, also expanded her views of literacy after she discussed

definitions of literacy with a group of third graders in the rural community where she

lived and worked as part of her data collection for the language and literacy mapping.

She asked students about the literacies they experienced and saw in their community on

their way to school. She was initially surprised with the way they responded to her query

and described it as,

> One of the first things a student shouted out was "Trees!" One might
>
> normally discard this idea, but I allowed them to take it farther and explain
>
> why they brought this idea up. The eager third grader told me that most of
>
> his route to school was trees. When asked why this was considered
>
> literacy, he explained that seeing the trees reminded him of nature and that
>
> he needed to play outside and get dirty. Perfect! There was a definite
>
> message there, and he got it loud and clear. Many of the children echoed
>
> the nature theme offering up the neighborhood swimming holes and
>
> springs, animals, and outdoor localities. It is obvious these students spend
>
> a lot of time in nature and consider it a formative part of who they are.
>
> They were also able to make the connection that living in such a beautiful
>
> place reminded them to take care of their planet.

While initially Erin may not have seen trees or the environment as pertaining to literacy,

the students she worked with were sharing with her how they read their world. Through

various activities including teacher reflections and class discussions such as these, the

teachers began to think about community literacies in a different way. This, coupled with readings, was the foundation for moving from community mapping to critical literacies as part of their literacy curricula.

What is the connection to Critical Literacies?

As the teachers collected and analyzed data on the communities surrounding their schools, they were asked to use that information to build critical literacies (Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997) units and tie some aspects of their unit to the linguistic and literate resources present in the community. It is important to note that there are multiple perspectives on critical literacies and they have been described in many different ways in the literature. As a group, we read several research articles and agreed to follow Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997) in naming it critical literacies (rather than the singular "critical literacy"). We came to understand critical literacies as

- Creating a lived literacies curriculum that arises from our communities, including sociopolitical experiences and histories (Vásquez, 2003) and broader definitions of what counts as literacies (Rush, 2003). Understanding the sociopolitical dimensions of our communities, including resource distribution acknowledges that literacies are not neutral (Street, 1995) but hold political and social power with the potential to change lives (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2000) and as such, critical literacies seek to interrogate and make visible such power.
- Rejecting an essentialist view and instead embracing complexity by problematizing through raising questions and seeking alternative solutions (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

- Considering multiple perspectives (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002)

   and paying attention to and seeking out the voices of the marginalized

   (Harste et. al, 2000)

- Engaging in praxis—reflection and action about our worlds in ways that

   have the potential to transform it (Freire, 1970)

These points were useful to teachers as they used the data they gathered in their school

communities and created units of study for their students. In many cases, these four

elements of critical literacies were interlaced throughout the lessons and built upon each

other, sometimes in inseparable ways. Although the critical literacies units took on many

different forms, each of the teachers incorporated these four elements into their literacy

curricula. Using these principles we agreed on as fundamental to critical literacies as a

guide, in the following sections I will present more detailed examples of how teachers

used the literacies they found in their students' communities to build critical literacies

curricula.

Bringing the outside in: Lived literacies as legitimate literacies

As previously mentioned, there are multiple approaches to critical literacies. For

some, critical literacies curricula are not always aligned with students' experiences

(Comber, Thompson & Wells, 2001), yet this dimension was crucial to our project and

understanding of critical literacies. Lea Shulman says, "The first influence on new

learning is not what teachers do pedagogically but the learning that's already inside the

learner" (Shulman quoted in Frederick, 2001). Literacies are already inside the learner

through children's experiences with the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Teachers

reflected on their own growing awareness of the literacies of their students through the

literacies and varied resources in the communities in which they taught. They wanted

their students to also experience a greater understanding of how literacies can be

represented in the "world" around them.

> In reflecting on what I saw, heard and discussed with members of the
>
> community and students [through the community mapping project], I
>
> realized there was a definite direction I could go when planning critical
>
> literacies lessons for this community of learners. The students are living in
>
> a growing and changing community, and living through the struggles that
>
> come with such growth…they live in a community struggling to redefine
>
> itself.

Erin took notice of how the students' daily lives in her rural school were rapidly

changing due to growth, demographic changes, and gentrification in the area. She

decided to build a critical literacies unit around a dynamic notion of community,

because as she noted in her introduction to the unit, communities are often viewed

as one-dimensional. The study of communities is included in virtually every

standardized curriculum starting in kindergarten, but in many instances,

community is portrayed as a static entity. Erin wanted to use aspects of

community that her students understood, as well as incorporate some of the

traditional notions of community such as a classroom, family, a city. But she also

wanted students to critically examine the responsibilities of communities. She

began her critical literacies unit by asking students to think about the resources in

their community, much like she had done in the community mapping project.

Next, she had students explore what aspects of their community were important to them through a questionnaire. Then in class, students began to identify and pinpoint on a map of the area important resources, some natural resources that had been identified through the questionnaires, and others that were official or institutional such as libraries, banks, etc. After these resources had been "mapped" in a similar way that Erin herself mapped the literacies she saw in the community, she guided her students through closer analysis of the resources by asking students what patterns they were able to identify of where people live and where certain resources are located. The students made hypotheses about why these patterns occurred and remarked about the inequitable and changing distribution of resources. Some class discussions centered around wealth distribution and the tensions between growth and natural resources management. The careful examination of their own community and local resources culminated with a visit from the city's mayor. Students asked him questions about resources and how they were allocated as well as future plans for more equitable distribution of resources.

Embracing Complexity

While Erin's students described their routes to school as full of trees and they lived in a rural community experiencing demographic shifts, Lynn's students lived in a very different community. She worked in an urban school with a high percentage of Spanish speaking students located in a densely populated area of a very large city. Lynn described the area around the school as "literacy overload" with a high number of signs in English and Spanish. She also portrayed the school community as actively supporting

the Spanish-English bilingual population and with a rich history of Spanish missions

within the school district boundaries. But despite this rich history, Lynn noted that

historical events were taught in simplistic and whitewashed (Sleeter, 2017) ways in

Texas, further encouraged by state standards' lack of depth. Lynn's critical literacies unit

was designed to take into account the historical resources in the area of the Spanish

missions, the cultural and linguistic background of many of her students, and to expand

on the standardized curriculum of Texas history. Lynn knew that many of the students in

her class were Mexican immigrants or Mexican Americans and her community mapping

project reinforced the understanding that Spanish was spoken and used as much if not

more than English in the area. Yet she knew that the folklore surrounding the Alamo and

other Spanish missions in Texas simplistically depicts the Tejanos or Mexicans as the

"bad guys" and the Anglos as the "good guys". Instead of presenting history this way,

she wanted her students to understand the complexities of life during the time the Spanish

established missions in Texas (during the late 17th and early 18th centuries). She noted,

"it is important to represent issues from the sides of the Tejanos, Native Americans, and

Anglos and find resources that address the positives of having the missionaries in Texas

and the negative side of the missionaries as well." Throughout the critical literacy unit

she asked her students to consider multiple perspectives around issues of ownership,

power, and government and religious interests in the early settlements in Texas in

different ways.

        One way that Lynn brought to life these issues of ownership, power, and interests,

is through moderated classroom debates. Lynn assigned her students particular points of

view (Spanish colonizer, Native American, Anglo-European English speaking colonizer,

Mexican) and then asked them to use various sources to put together a profile of that

community group and what their interests would be during the time of the early mission

settlements. As part of the project, students brought in artifacts representing the resources

in the area (i.e. plants, tools, clothing, photographs). The students then participated in a

debate bringing to life the complexities of life during the time of the Spanish colonization

and missions in Texas. She also had her students create a companion reader's theater that

they performed in both languages. These activities helped the students articulate the

various perspectives they had studied and helped them see the multiple points of view

their classmates researched.

Praxis

Understanding multiple viewpoints and how to use language in powerful

ways are both important aspects of critical literacies, but they do not stand alone.

An equally important, and perhaps more difficult aspect of critical literacies is

engaging in action to promote social justice. In many of the teachers' critical

literacies units, social action or praxis was less evident than the other aspects of

critical literacies. One notable exception was Jessica. Initially she wasn't sure

how much she would be able to do with her third grade students, but after

mapping the resources in her community and determining that her suburban,

middle class students were privileged, she wanted to help them better understand

poverty.

Jessica identified the critical literacies themes of complexity of problems

along with social action and praxis as the focal point for her unit. First, she chose

about a dozen fiction and nonfiction books that dealt with the hardships of

poverty. Then she designed several lessons where students discussed wants

versus needs, homelessness, resources and scarcity, and the impact of poverty on

various communities. She frequently asked her students to compare what they

were reading about with their own community and experiences. Jessica describes

Chambers' (2009) nonfiction book, *Tackling Poverty*, as one that had quite an

impact on her students and together with resources from

http://www.kidscanmakeadifference.org/ they decided on a service project they

implemented in their local community. While this was different from Jessica's

typical lessons, she reflected on the importance of such learning at the end of the

unit. She said,

> The big idea of teaching critical literacies is to help your students become
>
> aware of world issues, discuss them, and have them come up with some
>
> kind of plan of how they can make a difference. I learned how easy this
>
> was when I taught my own lesson. The kids really enjoyed it and I could
>
> see, just from doing one lesson, how many benefits these types of [praxis]
>
> lessons could give my students.

Discussion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

The teachers who participated in this project were asked to reflect on their

learning and to describe how community mapping and the critical literacies units changed

their teaching, if at all. I especially wondered if teachers had broader views of literacies

and if they had seen the benefit of community mapping for bringing community literacies

into their classroom literacy instruction.

While some teachers talked about how community mapping expanded their views of what counts as literacy, most of the teachers described how learning more about the community their students lived in was eye-opening for a variety of reasons including seeing new challenges in the community such as the invisibility of particular linguistic or ethnic groups. Some teachers described how simply documenting all of the language and literacies they noticed helped them think about literacies in new ways. Yet the project appeared to have the most impact when teachers asked their own students to engage in community mapping as well. One special education teacher who was enthusiastic about having students explore the literacies in their own lives, Lezlie, said that community mapping and a sociocultural approach to literacies not only opened her up to new ways of thinking about literacy but it also helped her name a theory of effective teaching for all students. She quoted from Pérez (2004) who describes literacy teaching from a sociocultural perspective as one that "seeks to understand the cultural context within which children have grown and developed. It seeks to understand how children interpret who they are in relation to others, and how children have learned to process, interpret, and encode their world" (p. 4).

Very few teachers described fear or anxiety regarding the community mapping (although many expressed doubt they would find many examples of literacies, particular more traditional writing). However, all of the teachers described initial uncertainty or fear about the critical literacies units. Despite those fears there were some teachers whose natural inclination was to jump in and try it out. These teachers came to realize this project not only expanded their own views of pedagogy, but also reinforced and allowed them to name practices they already engaged in. For example, Jessica said,

At the beginning of the semester I had a very intimidating view of what

critical literacy is and how it should be incorporated into the classroom. I

had this idea that it was this really complicated, long, and drawn out set of

lessons that you had to guide your students through. While building my

own unit and rereading some of the articles to help me, I really started to

realize that critical literacies is not something new and foreign to my

classroom.

Although critical literacies was not necessarily new to some of the teachers, none had

previously engaged in a systematic collection and analysis of language and literacy data

in their school communities. Many teachers reported how engaging with their school

community in a deeper, more sustained way broadened their view of what counts as

literacy and literacy teaching. Engaging in the community language and literacy

mapping project **before** creating the critical literacies unit helped teachers understand the

range of literacies that exists in their students' communities and was an important tool for

helping the teachers think about ways to bring students' literacies into the standardized

literacy curriculum. Erin described the role of multimodalities and multiple sources in

understanding her students' lived experiences and literacies by saying, *"Books are not*

enough. We need to open our eyes and look around to incorporate the literacies that

surround our students and are relevant to them."

This project was designed to help open teachers' eyes to the languages and

literacies present in the communities where they teach so they can cultivate

critical literacies instruction and build excellent classroom instruction around

students' practices and lived experiences. Starting with the Community Mapping

activity was key in helping teachers understand their students' lived literacies and broadening their sense of what counts as literacy. Most of the teachers reported the mapping as instrumental in helping them think about literacies in new ways and to shed deficit perspectives of the communities in which they taught. Yet there were some instances where the community informant reinforced negative views of the community. For example, in Christine's rural community a retired teacher she interviewed stated that there were very few opportunities for students to engage in literate practices in the community. This perspective heightened Christine's anxiety about finding examples of literacy in the community and contributed to her overall view of the rural community as deficient.

On the other hand, teachers who also asked their students to identify the literacies of their lives and engage in similar mapping and literacy identifying activities were able to specifically build on community literacies in even richer ways than we initially imagined. For example, Erin lived in a rural community that was similar to Christine's. However, she built on children's own notions of literacies in their environment and nature, broadening her sense of literacies and eventually creating a rich curriculum built around their unique community's natural resources. While it is difficult to control for the potentially negative perspectives of community informants, in the future it would be important to hold discussions around choosing informants and deflecting such limited views. Interestingly, the public school students themselves, when asked, provided the most open and broadened sense of literacies. Although in this project it was not a requirement that teachers engage students in this way, it may be beneficial to do

so in the future. After all, students are best equipped to give us insight into their own lives and literacies.

Connecting the community literacies to a pedagogical product, the critical literacies unit, was key for the teachers' learning and ability to incorporate community literacies in their lessons. Too often teachers examine or explore community resources but stop short of bringing those resources into their classroom instruction. In this study, teachers were required to build on what they found. Perhaps because communities are made up of different perspectives, two elements of critical literacy seemed to be a natural fit for all the teachers: embracing complexity and considering multiple perspectives. However, with the exception of Jessica, they found it difficult to create opportunities for action and push their students to promote social justice in concrete ways.

In the opening vignette Jessica describes her realization through the course of this project that she had made assumptions about her students and the community she promised herself she would never make. Jessica's point is important in thinking about the potential for Community Language and Literacy Mapping projects such as this. In this time of increased student diversity, teachers can and should learn about and with their students and communities through careful observation and ethnographic methods (Rogers, 2000; Villenas, 2019). In addition, connecting students' lived literacies to official, standardized curricula can be powerful. The teachers in this project all built critical literacies units that included both state standards and the community resources they found. Although this can be difficult in these increasingly scripted times, I hope the story of these

teachers will encourage other teachers, professors, and researchers in explicitly

bringing community literacies into classroom literacies. This can be one more

tool for providing relevant, authentic, and critical literacies curriculum for diverse

students.

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