

Welcoming Their Worlds: Rethinking Literacy Instruction through Community Mapping

Eric rarely did his homework. He is a bright sixth-grade student who is more focused on having fun and making his fellow classmates smile or watch in awe at his bravery than on following the classroom norms and engaging with the curriculum. His teacher, George Herrera, says, “He is one that we call ‘travieso’ [Spanish for mischievous or naughty]. Not a bad student but not one very engaged.” Yet, today, he came into class clearly excited about his homework in the poetry unit and, for the first time, fully engaged. George describes the situation this way:

Eric’s face and slouching body could easily be interpreted as saying, “Is this lesson over yet?” However, this time there was something significantly different and profound about the change in his demeanor and engagement. As it turned out, when his mother was expecting him, she had written an acrostic poem about him coming into her life. She had never shared that poem with him. As a result of this assignment, she took out the poem and read it to him for the first time. He was so thrilled that this poem existed about him, and he was eager to share it with his classmates.

In response to this particular unit, 31 of 32 students brought poems in from home. During the in-class writing activity around their poems, Eric was energetic and proud to share his poem. And he was not alone. George was taken aback at his students’ “eagerness to get on task,” noting:

This moment was somewhat surreal for me. . . . I kept wondering what happened. Up until they brought their poems from home, it had been me expending the greatest energy and making the utmost effort to keep students engaged. Now, the engagement was organic, and the energy was being produced by them.” (written reflection, 12/2011)

George Herrera, an elementary teacher in a mid-size urban K–12 school district located outside of

a large metropolitan area in the western United States, became very excited about how this single effort to integrate the literacies of home and school transformed student learning. Before that moment, conscious of the economic poverty of many of his students, he had rarely asked them to connect school work to conversations, practices, or resources at home. A number of his students were technically homeless, living in converted garages or small sheds behind other homes (George, interview, 11/2011). George believed that by not asking students to bring things from home, he had been “doing them a favor,” and “making the playing field more even.” Over time, however, as he engaged in a form of community mapping (Tindle, Leconte, Buchanan, & Taymans, 2005), he began to develop an increasing awareness of the literacies already present in students’ home lives, as well as the lack of time and space in his classroom for the kinds of talk and texts that came from home.

George Herrera’s community mapping work emerged from his participation in a Family Literacy Community of Practice or CoP (Wenger, 1999), a group formed around a collectively owned inquiry about the literacies in students’ family and community life and how those might support school-based literacy learning. As part of this work, George was using the analytic and conceptual tools of an ethnographer to map the literacies in the surrounding community. This process was changing how he thought about the role and value of out-of-school literacy practices and how they could support school learning. Along with the other teachers in the CoP, George had begun to redefine his understanding of school-based literacy to recognize the multiple and complex literacies available to students—literacies he had typically ignored. So, while he cast it as a

“spur of the moment” decision to ask students to bring a poem from home, George Herrera’s instructional practice had begun to reflect new insights based upon his CoP inquiry, “How might home-centered literacies service the school curriculum even more?”

In this article, we focus on George Herrera as both teacher and learner to examine the ways in which he developed insights about home and community literacy practices, and then intentionally drew upon these insights to facilitate school-based literacy learning for his students. We describe his change in practice in the context of the learning and mapping activities of all members of the community of practice of which he was a member. Through this lens, we look closely at learning and the ways that

engagement, performance, and meaning making were mediated by the creation of a learning context that valued and connected student words and worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Theory

Community mapping is an inquiry-based method in which “mappers” discover, gather, and analyze a rich array of resources from a specific geographic area to develop new understanding of the cultural and linguistic practices that make up its community life (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2011). In specialized fields such as sociology, urban planning, and environmental science, community mapping is used to build knowledge and awareness of community

STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Mr. Herrera used many strategies to engage the students in his classroom. These resources from ReadWriteThink.org can highlight a few of those strategies:

Rummaging for Fiction: Using Found Photographs and Notes to Spark Story Ideas

In this lesson, students use found notes and found photographs as inspiration to help them identify subjects, settings, characters, and conflicts for pieces of creative writing.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/rummaging-fiction-using-found-1108.html>

Utilizing Visual Images for Creating and Conveying Setting in Written Text

This lesson supports students in grades three through six as they communicate story setting to their readers through the use of visual image prompts. Activities include individual work and cooperative learning group work, as well as whole-class discussion.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/utilizing-visual-images-creating-30506.html>

A Trip to the Museum: From Picture to Story

Visit a museum or art gallery (either online or in person) with children and teens, helping them find inspiration for a story based on a piece of art that they particularly enjoy or relate to.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/activities-projects/trip-museum-from-picture-30302.html>

Looking at Landmarks: Using a Picturebook to Guide Research

This lesson uses *Ben’s Dream* by Chris Van Allsburg to highlight ten major landmarks of the world. Students research the landmarks and present their findings to the class.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/looking-landmarks-using-picture-841.html>

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

assets, needs, and historical/demographic trends (Tindle, Leconte, Buchanan, & Taymans, 2005). 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.

Luis Moll's work (see Moll & Gonzalez, 2004) on *funds of knowledge* has helped to frame teacher action research—including teachers' observations and documentation of how students and community members attach meaning to language and literacy practices—as a central approach to developing effective curricula in which out-of-school knowledge practices support school-based knowledge practices. New understandings gained from systematically locating language and literacy resources through inquiry-based investigative work such as community mapping may also broaden teachers' understanding of literacy instruction so they may approach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing as permeated by social and emotional issues (Gee, 1989; Taylor, 2010). In other words, by mapping the literacies in students' cultural lives in the home and the surrounding community and intentionally working to situate those authentically in the core of school-based practices (Auerbach, 2001), teachers allow the emotional and intellectual dimensions of literacy—which make practices authentic and purposeful—to guide student learning.

George's attempts to tap the funds of knowledge of his students and families involved appropriating the ethnographic tools of community mapping and applying them to his students' local communities. These data-gathering methods include collecting and interpreting surveys, interviews, artifacts, and recorded/documented observations of community events. Community mapping also involved a process of deep reflection and conversation between George and other members of the community of practice to understand the patterns, themes, and relationships between the worlds of students in and out of school. CoP meetings provided an opportunity for George and his colleagues to share what they had learned from the activities they had selected to "map" in the weeks between meetings,

and to co-construct meanings that they committed to immediately apply to actions as educators.

Methods/Context

This study was constructed as a teacher action research project where schools and communities are viewed as sites for both learning and inquiry (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). Teacher research is a means to construct new knowledge and improve practice; its power and potential are enhanced when teachers have the opportunity to collaborate and critically reflect with others to expand the number of shared perspectives (Hobson, 2001). As such, this study is centered on George Herrera, an experienced elementary school teacher of 17 years, as a member of a teacher-led CoP that focused on family literacy. Using his students' communities as settings for study and critical analysis, George carried out a teacher inquiry project that required him to map the cultural, linguistic, and literacy "geographies" (Moll, 2010, p. 454) surrounding his school site.

George and the other CoP members visited local religious, cultural, civic, and commercial sites to identify the literacy practices that were typical and the ways families and communities engaged with them; they met with parents in focus groups and interviews to discuss literacy routines and practices; they created physical and conceptual maps delineating the values and knowledge in the community that could be an effective resource to support school-based literacy learning. Unlike the family literacy activities in their school, which focused on getting parents to attend evening academic events or utilize particular strategies or resources at home, these teachers actively worked to instantiate in their classroom practices their growing belief in the interconnected nature of in- and out-of-school literacies.

During mapping activities, George took field notes and maintained a journal to record new findings or discoveries that caused him to question

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his previous understandings about families and/or the community. Through this ongoing process of critically reexamining and reinterpreting his own knowledge and experiences, we believe George was able to enter the community with a fresh perspective and a new disposition, allowing him to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the community and the reciprocity that could be developed in literacy practice as students engaged in composing and comprehension activities that were authentic across contexts.

Who We Are?

As the three authors of this study, we work in diverse organizations (foundation, university, public school) but share a commitment to collaborative inquiry that improves student literacy achievement, especially for those students whose linguistic and socio-historical experiences often marginalize and disenfranchise them in classrooms. In one sense, George Herrera was, along with other CoP members, originally a research “subject”; Dunsmore and Ordoñez-Jasis were given access to his reflective journals, action research field notes, as well as permission to attend and take field notes on CoP meetings, conduct semi-structured interviews, video/

audio record CoP meetings and calls, and log emails for later analysis. In the process of analyzing data for this article and engaging in “member checking” (Creswell, 2009), however, Herrera became more “co-researcher” as he actively

and skillfully moved back and forth between his roles as research subject and researcher, wherein he contributed to analyses of the student work, videotaped instruction, and student interviews that all parents and students in the classroom had consented to share. In addition, during follow-up interviews with the focal students in this article, they requested (and parents consented) for their real names to be used (we chose to use first names only). Naming oneself and locating one’s identity in the academic

curriculum was a central theme of students’ experience as learners in this work and of George’s insight as a teacher. As a result, all names in this article are real. We believed it important that participants own their own stories.

What Is a CoP and Who Are the Members of the Family Literacy CoP in This Study?

There were 10 members of the Family Literacy CoP, one of whom was a parent invited to join the group mid-year as the group became more conscious of their need to bring the voices of parents into the design of the inquiry and analysis of data. This district has nearly 16,000 students in 23 schools, 58% of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and 34% of whom are English Language Learners. Ethnically, the district is approximately 60% Latino and 30% Asian, with very small numbers of European American, African American, and other ethnic/racial groups.

The district itself has undergone rapid demographic change over the past 20 years, moving from an agrarian community with European American dominance to sprawling urban and suburban neighborhoods with either Asian American or Latino communities that are predominantly immigrant or first generation. There is a constant theme in district conversations about the need to build “reciprocal relationships” with families; this goal, in fact, is codified in the 2008 strategic plan (Rowland Unified School District, 2008).

The majority of George’s CoP members self-identified as Latino; half had a personal connection to one of the school communities (e.g., attended the district as children or currently lived in the district). The CoP members represented different schools/grades in the district and self-selected into this group, which was supported by the district as part of a systematic effort to create voluntary, teacher-led learning communities on topics identified by teachers themselves.

The explicit rationale for communities of practice in this district was built on a theory of action in which sustained change in literacy achievement for all students was premised on creating a professional

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culture in which collaboration, inquiry, and shared agreements about practice characterized the daily work of teachers. Based upon the research and theoretical grounding of Etienne Wenger (1999), communities of practice reflected ways people learned together (around areas of common interest; through self-directed and shared inquiry, with a focus on developing individual *and* collective expertise).

The *community of practice model* employed as part of this work was integral to the *community mapping process*, since meaning making and action for both the group and the individual were tied to the conversational tools and protocols teachers used. The question “What are we learning?” in the community mapping process was always followed by “And now what will we do?” Specifically, the collaboration allowed George to learn about the community and its literacies from other participants. He often found the mapping activities of other CoP members equally important for his own learning. George explained that, “It’s that collective piece that was most powerful. . . . we bring it all together and we all connect and we find the themes” (George, interview, 5/2011).

Data & Interpretations

Making the Unfamiliar Known

Although extremely outgoing, comfortable with talking to parents and inviting them into his classroom, fluent in Spanish, and conversant in the cultural mores of the Latino community, when George ventured out to observe, interview, and capture practices, he was surprised at how nervous and uncomfortable he was outside of his classroom. When visiting the public library just blocks from his school, he entered with a clipboard, walked around the library, and stood back observing a folk music performance. Taken for an “inspector,” he realized that he was using his clipboard to distance himself by creating a safer space as a visible outsider. Surprised by his discomfort, he realized that he needed to develop skills and strategies to explore places and spaces that were unfamiliar. Because of his “fear of the unknown,” it took him three separate

mapping trips to enter a building with “Welcome. Come In” written in Spanish on the front (George, personal communication, 7/2011). With no signs indicating its purpose, he imagined multiple scenarios (including a drug rehabilitation center); it turned out to be a vitamin store. Over time, George gained more comfort and skill with the tools of recognizing, observing, and recording the literacy practices and resources of families and communities.

Although George had worked in the district for many years and shared similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds with many members of his school community (which was predominantly Latino), he was unsure how to use what he was learning about students and community literacies as a way to organize curriculum. In a second round of community mapping, George and two members of the CoP decided to conduct parent interviews and home visits in order to develop a better understanding of families’ language and literacy-related beliefs and practices.

While interacting with parents and their children, George observed several examples of storytelling, particularly those stories or *consejos* (family or generational, morally oriented teachings) that held cultural and religious value for the families. He also discovered ways in which parents engaged their children in culturally relevant literacy-based activities. These included creating and designing *calaveras* (sugar skulls) for Day of the Dead and teaching games such as *Loteria* (Mexican game similar to bingo) and *La Pirinola* (traditional Mexican game). At the following CoP meeting, George excitedly reported back to the group about the many rich practices he was able to identify. These candid conversations with families in their homes also contributed to a significant shift in George’s perspective; he moved from viewing schools as the center of the community toward a renewed appreciation

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that schools and households actually inhabit the community equally.

It’s so different when you walk inside of a house, when you’re sitting there with a family. It changes your perspective. . . . I always saw the school as a center of the community and they come to us. . . . We see ourselves as the center of the community but to them, [school is] just one aspect [of their world].

After conducting the home visits and parent interviews, the CoP reflected upon the process of community mapping and their collective insights, which they called their “aha” moments. Table 1 synthesizes the CoP’s summarizing and sense making as the group members moved to more actively explore implications for their pedagogy and practice.

George explained that “the most important thing that I have seen is that by going out into the community and talking to parents, I learn more about students. If I learn more about my students, I can connect better with them” (George, interview, 5/2011). The next step was to figure out how to build curriculum that reflected that connection.

Connecting to the Classroom

As the school year was quickly coming to an end, George was still struggling to identify ways in which his growing knowledge about his students’ family and community literacies could inform his instructional practice. In CoP discussions and individual reflections and interviews, George voiced the

Table 1. A synthesis of the CoP’s mapping steps and subsequent insights

Community Mapping Activities	Significant “Aha” Moments for CoP Members
<i>Scout</i> the geographical location to identify possible community resources. CoP members drove, walked, and used public transportation to learn about the community’s libraries, parks, churches, small family-owned businesses, and nonprofit agencies.	Recognized stereotypes of community and redefined function and meaning of spaces, events, organizations (e.g., local park that was deemed “unsafe” by teachers and staff was actually a vibrant community center with art and dance classes, organized sports, cultural events, and activities).
<i>Photograph and/or videotape</i> the various places of interest. CoP members photographed interesting cultural and linguistic symbols found throughout the community.	Saw incredible diversity of resources, organizations, and culturally significant spaces with which they were previously unfamiliar; when images were publicly shared, they discovered surprising relationships (e.g., a teacher in Dunsmore’s school was a local library president; others were local church members) that had been hidden in the professional life of school teaching.
<i>Collect</i> artifacts. CoP members collected documents such as brochures, maps, and pamphlets from the various sites to share with the other members.	Learned that many parents were not aware of the community resources available to them. Members brainstormed ways to share this information with families districtwide. Few teachers were aware of these resources or that the resources could support their work (e.g., public library close to school, which none had ever visited).
<i>Survey or interview parents/primary caregivers.</i> CoP members developed survey and interview protocols aimed toward developing a better understanding of how parents construct literacy experiences for children.	Reframed traditional notions of literacy to include culturally and linguistically relevant literacy practices (poems, songs, games, storytelling). Recognized a need to create critical spaces for student voice and student interest in pedagogy and practice.
<i>Conduct home visits.</i> CoP members visited the homes of several families with the goal of learning about families and developing positive, reciprocal relationships with parents.	Moved from viewing schools as the center of the community and the locus of educational power and control toward an understanding that schools and households are critical components of the same community.
<i>Meet and interview community informants.</i> Teachers and parents spoke with community members (residents, librarians, bus drivers, pastors, small business owners) to obtain various perspectives on literacy-based resources and community assets.	Developed insight into how multiple and situated community literacies support, rather than contradict, literacy learning within the classroom (e.g., members learned about the efforts of local churches to promote literacy in children’s primary language—such as Spanish, Korean, Chinese—in afterschool and weekend programs).

need for a significant “shift in paradigm” in order to practice a pedagogy of inclusion that was more representative of multiple and situated literacies (field notes, 3/2011). This reflected a new understanding, grounded in data, about how community literacies support, rather than contradict, literacy learning within the classroom. It also led him to think about the purpose of the classroom routines: “I’m beginning to make a distinction between reading and writing and literacy,” George explained in a CoP meeting. “Literacy means that you are reading things that are important to you, that matter to you, that somehow change your way of thinking or drive you into making a change for something, and that’s where I’ve seen students become more passionate” (field notes, 3/2011). In his classroom, he began to try out half-formed ideas about what instructional practices that connected students worlds’ might look like.

In the context of teaching his sixth-grade students a six-week standards-based poetry unit, George decided that for the next CoP meeting, he would have some specific actions he could share about how he had connected the community to his classroom instruction. George explained his process:

One afternoon, I had a few minutes to spare, so I got in my car and started driving around the community. I was on a quest to photograph anything that might be a cultural or linguistic symbol. . . . After a few moments of enjoying my pictures . . . [I] realized that the pictures in and of themselves, colorful as they were, had minimal if any value for me as a teacher. “So what?” The next day at school I was not sure of what to do with the pictures, so I decided to show them to my students to see what value the pictures might have, if any, for them. . . . As soon as I flashed the first picture on the screen, their engagement, disposition, and enthusiasm shifted into what I refer to as a heightened state. (written reflections 12/2011)

Together, students began making meaningful connections with the images of their worlds. After showing a variety of photos, George displayed an image of a seven-foot-tall statue of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by candles and encased in glass. It sat by the street in front of a house (see Fig. 1). One student, Samantha, exclaimed with surprise and pride, “That’s my house! That is our statue to Mary.” Samantha explained that this was the Virgin of Guadalupe. Her



Figure 1. Samantha recognized George’s local photo as the front of her home.

father had purchased it and built the glass enclosure when her aunt was very sick; it also commemorated Samantha’s middle name (Guadalupe). The aunt got well and the statue remained as a testimony to their faith in the Virgin. The mainly Catholic Latino immigrant neighborhood used it as an altar for their own petitions and memorials. Most of the students in the classroom were familiar with it. The energy and engagement was so “passionate and real” that George created an extension activity to utilize their motivation and interest in support of writing. They were requested to select four photos and write a short prose poem for each that described their personal connection. Student enthusiasm with the writing task was “unparalleled, reflective, and profound” (written reflections 12/2011). He later noted that:

As a teacher, I find myself at times trying to persuade students to invest themselves in the writing task. That persuasion was not necessary here. Upon reading their writings, the lesson for me was how connected and interconnected my students were to their community. Samantha’s writing on the Virgin of Guadalupe was

especially touching. Though she struggled with the writing exam a few days later, her thoughts and language flowed beautifully.

Samantha, classified as an English Language Learner, had struggled with completing the district English Language Development (ELD) benchmark writing exam that George had administered and scored. Writing, George noted, had been a labor for her all year. In this assignment, writing about an aspect of her family life that was deeply meaningful and of which she was extremely proud, she was intensely engaged. She was very excited to share the writing with her classmates and teacher as well (teacher reflection, 5/2011).

George noted in amazement that the writing she produced about this important family icon had a significantly higher quality and quantity of words and provided evidence of a two-point increase in her ELD level (as measured by the district rubric); it was far more advanced than anything she had produced throughout the year. In addition, she

sustained the writing to complete an organized, coherent, engaging piece, something that rarely happened and not without significant support and prodding by the teacher (email, 12/2011). Samantha admitted putting more energy into this writing

because “it was what I really feel about real life” (Samantha, interview, 5/2012). For Samantha, the ability to talk and write about something with a deep personal and family connection was more than an opportunity to utilize her prior knowledge, it was an opportunity to connect to and share her feelings, her values, her beliefs through literate practices (speaking, writing, interpreting iconography) that were “real life.”

Curriculum That Names Me and My Community

Two weeks later at the CoP meeting, George recounted this “spontaneous” classroom activity with the other members. He described the poignant

and personal connections students made with the community images. Inspired by this experience, the group discussed the power and potential of taking a more student-centered approach by providing opportunities for students to actively negotiate and “decode” the multiple literacies within their own communities (field notes, 4/2011). Soon thereafter, George made another “spur of the moment” instructional decision. He asked students to bring in a poem from home that was significant to them. According to George, this simple request created a “change in their energy and disposition that was immediate and palpable that caused me to be optimistic that at least five or six students might bring poetry artifacts from home” (written reflections, 12/2011). However, the following day when he arrived at school:

I was surprised to see that many of my students were already waiting outside of the classroom door sharing their poetry with each other. . . . Of the 32 students in my classroom, 31 brought back some form of an artifact with a poem that was meaningful to them. The average for homework return is rarely that high. Swiftly, in order to focus their energy . . . I asked students to write about the specific poem they brought in, where it was kept in their house, and why it was meaningful to them. Their passion and connection to their writing could be sensed in their intense concentration and the manner in which their pencils moved across the pages. . . . [This] dictated that I take a step back and become a facilitator of what they wanted to do. . . . I learned about their hopes, fears, and dreams.”

Especially eye-opening was the engagement of Eric, the aforementioned disengaged and disinterested student. Eric was suddenly eager, present, and articulate in writing when talking about the poem his mother had written about him. Eric described the shift in his engagement and interest in learning, writing, and talking about poetry as directly centered on finding a connection to his mother through poetry: “I didn’t feel really energetic about them [poems] because I wasn’t a really good poem person myself” (Eric, interview, 5/2012). Then he was assigned to locate a poem from home. When he asked his mother for help, she shared poetry that, unbeknownst to him, she had periodically written over the years. “She had poems,” he commented “and, well, I turned out to like them because they

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were about me when I was small, and she actually was really creative about the writing.” He talked about how reading them made “me feel that I was cared for and my mom, all those things my mom said in the poem were nice and just makes me feel like really happy and to know that she took her time to write those,” and although he thought he might be “shy, embarrassed” to share the poem with his classmates, he wanted to “show my mom that I like what she does so she can also feel important” (see Fig. 2). For Eric, his connection to the Language Arts Standards came through a conversation at home, with his mother, and by reading and sharing with his classmates poetry that had meaning in his family.

George saw that letting “poetic words of the students’ worlds” come in did not take any planning or time, but it did require a belief in the capacity of his students to engage at a cultural and spiritual level with their teacher and their classmates, as well as their willingness to share their intimate world with the world of the classroom. Thinking back on the ease with which he was able to open a space for home literacies, he noted that “there was also a connection between sixth-graders searching to claim an identity and a process that validates who they are and what matters to them” (George, personal communication, 12/2011).

He was now determined to use the three-week Memorial Unit (the culmination of the poetry unit that connected to social studies goals and bridged the Memorial Day weekend) to integrate students’ worlds into the classroom by building upon what he had learned—that student engagement and increased achievement in writing result from connecting to experiences with family meaning and value. He started by having a discussion with his students about the national tradition behind this holiday. Much to his dismay, their interest was “lukewarm at best.” Then, a few students recalled that some of the photos he had previously shared included familiar murals honoring soldiers in their community, and they requested that he display them again.

Taking on the role of community informants, the students proceeded to share with the class other memorials in the community. In the past, George would have typically redirected this conversation back to what students knew about Vietnam or about memorials honoring American soldiers (George, interview, 6/2011). In fact, he had done so when teaching this unit to his previous year’s class. Then, several students suggested that the Vietnam Wall was like a “memorial” that had been erected on the school property. Repeatedly, he told students that there was no memorial at the corner nearest the school, but the students kept insisting there was. When George drove home that evening and passed that corner, he noticed the weather-beaten flowers, stuffed animals, candles, and wreaths that sat commemorating an accident

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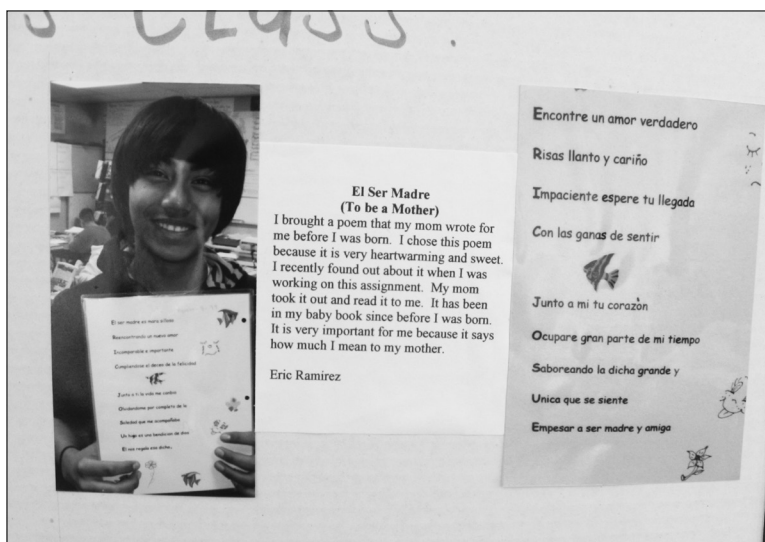


Figure 2. Eric makes a meaningful connection with a poem his mother wrote while pregnant with him.

and the loss of a community member at that location. Instantly, he realized that he was thinking about memorials in terms of statues, but students were thinking of the act of using space to remember.

Understanding what students were noting, he still thought there was a significant difference between these private acts and the learning he wanted them to have about the Vietnam War Memorial. Eventually, however, George came to realize that students needed an opportunity to fully connect their community with classroom concepts. As a result, he decided to build this unit around the “memorializing” practices of students (George, personal conversation, 6/2011).

In the past, George had rejected local customs and practices as different from the school-sanctioned knowledge; now he sought to see in his students’ experiences the embodiment of concepts that intersected their worlds. Students listed numerous sites as well as family practices around remembering and honoring those who have passed. He showed students a tree planted on the school grounds in memory of the deceased son of a school secretary, Mrs. Elsa, who also lived in the community. Connecting the abstract concept of a memorial to stories and symbols that were tangible, relevant, and meaningful to students heightened their interest. As a result, students in his class suggested that they create their own memorial space in the classroom and hold a remembering event. George was hesitant at first, since scheduling constraints meant this would happen on the second to last day of school.

Parents and community members were quick to offer their support for this event. Students wrote either letters or poems to soldiers who lost their lives. . . . Some offered to bring flowers or candles, others photos, pins, medals, certificates, and other service memorabilia. A few students asked if they could also place a picture of a lost loved one at the memorial. My first instinct was to say “no” because the project was focused on remembrance of loved ones who have served in the military. Fortunately, the little community mapping voice in my head told me to embrace the students’ suggestions, and we created a more inclusive Memorial Project. (George, written reflection, 12/2011)

The day of the unveiling, students decided on their own that it was a “dress-up event.” Several of

the boys even wore ties (field notes, 5/2011). The highlight of the event was Mrs. Elsa, who was personally invited by the students as a guest speaker. She spoke about her son and why it was important for her to remember him. She shared the things she does to pay tribute to his memory, and she spoke about the tree and her feelings toward it. Then a student asked if there was a poem that reminded her of her son. She carried one with her but was unable to read it, asking instead if George would read it for her. George remembers the intensity of that moment, when sixth-grade students on the second to last day of school sat quietly, attentive, and intensely engaged. Some students cried as they listened to the poem. After Mrs. Elsa left, the students “begged” him for time yet that day to write her a follow-up letter (see Fig. 3). He noted:

Keeping them on-task was effortless. If anything, the challenge was bringing the writing segment to a close. As I was putting the letters together to deliver to Mrs. Elsa, I was struck by two major things. One was the level of student voice, heart, and sincerity. The other was the natural flow of their writing that is frequently lacking in many of their writing products. For example, one student, Jennifer, struggled all year to include her voice in her writing. In her letter to Mrs. Elsa, she found her voice, and I was especially touched by her prose (see Fig. 3).

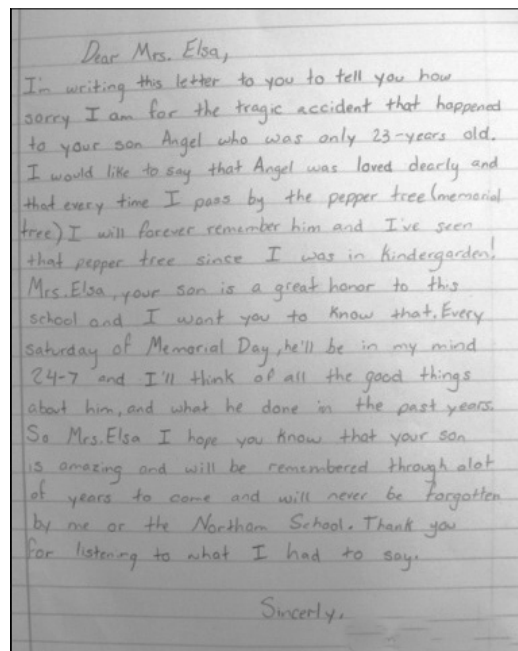


Figure 3. Jennifer writes to Mrs. Elsa after hearing her speak about the loss of her son.

Jennifer explained that this writing gave her “the liberty to express myself,” and it was about something that “I felt really connected to,” and “because it had to do with me” it supported “connecting to the teacher” (George, interview, 5/2012). She commented that she had come to see that poetry and facts in books about memorials actually “connect to, like, real life and how you live right now.”

For George, the event invited student, family, and community worlds to create a learning space in which motivation and engagement were high and the literacy practices surrounding the event captured students emotionally as well as intellectually. George noticed that the writing in the letters to Mrs. Elsa was, for many of the students, a dramatic improvement over what he typically saw in classroom writing. The letters featured longer, more complicated sentences, more detail, and increased length (more words!). Evaluated on the district rubric, the writing consistently had higher voice, more sophisticated description, and better organization. By creating a personal connection and an authentic audience and purpose, students became engaged, and the facts in what Jennifer described as “the books” came to be part of their real life, just as real life entered into the core of classroom conversation.

Discussion

This article examines how a teacher in a CoP with a focused inquiry on family literacy utilized ethnographic tools and methods to map the community and family literacies of his students and use that knowledge to build curriculum that connected students’ in- and out-of-school worlds. In the initial conversations about the goals for family literacy, George talked generally about making families welcome in the classroom. Mapping the literacies present in families and schools moved him to place the literacies of the home and community at the heart of instructional design and literacy practice. By the end of the year, he was wondering how he might “develop curriculum units with parents” (recorded CoP session, 5/2011). For George, the focal case in this story, the community mapping process supported development of the dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed to create classroom experiences

that intentionally connected the world inside of school with that outside. “That’s when it [my teaching] came to life” (George, interview, 12/2011).

Through the monthly CoP discussions, reflections, and analysis of data gathered as part of the community mapping project, George began the slow process of reframing traditional notions of literacy to include culturally and linguistically relevant literacy practices, such as the ones uncovered during the home visits and parent interviews mentioned above. George’s learning within the context of a CoP helped him to integrate daily classroom instruction with vision for teaching that was built upon collective insights about students’ out-of-school literacy practices. Through conversations with colleagues, George began to redefine and broaden the practices that “counted” as literacy and develop beliefs about the kinds of curricular experiences that simultaneously tapped local expertise and knowledge and supported (and extended and refined) school-based literacy goals.

George Herrera is considered an excellent teacher and, by many accounts, holds the background, experience, and practices needed to construct classroom pedagogies that are culturally responsive and inclusive. He is viewed by parents, colleagues, and administrators as a caring and accessible teacher, hard working, and constantly engaged in professional learning and action research to improve his practice. Yet, George explains, it was the process of community mapping and the collective meaning making in his CoP that provided the impetus and conceptual tools he needed to reinvent his teaching in ways that better allowed student voices and knowledge to inform and guide instruction.

Through this work, George began creating spaces that invited students to bring the artifacts, meanings, values, and resources of their home and community into the real work of classroom learning.

George’s learning within the context of a CoP helped him to integrate daily classroom instruction with vision for teaching that was built upon collective insights about students’ out-of-school literacy practices.

Student engagement, learning, and achievement increased when home, community, and school literacy routines were equally valued and legitimate. By asking students to bring in resources or stories from home or having them write about objects in their community, the students became deeply excited about classroom learning. And, significantly, in a time of test scores and standards, as George tapped into previously dormant student interests and experiences, they began to demonstrate striking improvements in their writing. Literacy became personal and included the affective dimension of human experience that gives meaning to our literate lives. George sums it up this way: “What I have found to be incredibly important was the message I was sending, more so than the words I was saying. I was letting students know that their worlds were welcome in our classroom and relevant to our learning” (written reflections, 12/2011).

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These authors are active members of and contributors to the *National Center for Literacy Education’s Literacy in Learning Exchange* community. Learn more about how their work in community mapping is being scaled from one community of practice to a districtwide (21 schools) initiative by going to <http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/community-mapping>. There you can choose to follow their group, listen to an archived webinar, read a vignette, or watch a video clip of participants talking about their learning and work.