

Chapter 13

Raising Awareness of the City as a Text: Multimodal, Multicultural, and Multilingual Resources for Education

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the semiotic landscape of the city to analyze multimodal, multicultural, and multilingual resources for language and literacy education. In this ethnographic study, teacher-researchers explore urban literacies as social, artistic, political, cultural, and pedagogical practices that connect different community actors, diverse texts, and local realities. Data were collected through community tours, photographs (a corpus of 387 photographs), and semi-structured interviews with graffiti artists and community inhabitants. The findings reveal that semiotic and linguistic landscapes that surround schools can be harnessed to develop critical place awareness and to recognize the audiences and purposes of multimodal texts embedded in the environments. It also leads to the recognition of multicultural and linguistic diversity that is rarely reflected in school-centered curriculum and de-contextualized textbooks.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports the partial findings of a two-year ethnographic study on literacy and local pedagogies for social transformation. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the social and cultural aspects of multiculturalism and multilingualism that are present in the historic district of Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia. This chapter reports on the experiences of five novice teacher-researchers (language teachers and students in a master's in Applied Linguistics program) and two university-based researchers.

Drawing on our commitment to collaboratively develop ethnographies of place (Pink, 2008) in two communities in the historical district of Bogotá (La Candelaria and Santafé), we visited places, interacted with community inhabitants, and took pictures as samples of semiotic elements that reflected multiculturalism and multilingualism in the community.

This collaborative ethnography was a learning space for novice teacher-researchers. Weekly working sessions were held throughout the project as in a graduate seminar where all members could dialogue and exchange their experiences, knowledge and insights regarding the places we studied during collaborative ethnography. We found ourselves discussing and (re)thinking theoretical, methodological, and analytical aspects. In other words, the development of this research was not a straightforward path. For example, during the data collection phase, we adapted methodological elements; during the analysis phase as a group, we explored and deepened theoretical elements that were relevant. As for the phases of the ethnography, we began by identifying the research question. As teachers and researchers in the field of local and world language literacy education, we noticed that in our city very few studies inquire about the community and linguistic resources of the historic district of Bogotá and their pedagogical potential for multicultural and multilingual education. With this study we aimed at identifying connections between languages and literacies in the city, its multilingual and multicultural resources and their potential for critical and decolonial language and literacy education.

In the beginning of the study, we drew on three main constructs: Community-Based Pedagogies (Sharkey, Clavijo & Ramírez, 2016), linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), and ethnography of place (Pink, 2008). As we engaged in dialogue, data collection, and analysis we refined our conceptual framing by delving into *urban literacies*, *semiotic landscapes*, *multiculturalism* and *multilingualism*. In the analysis of findings, we also made connections to decolonial epistemologies as we found that multiple samples centered on indigeneity, Afro-Colombian culture, and subaltern ideologies.

While previous studies suggest that cities are linguistically configured through diverse texts (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008; Landry & Bourhis, 1997) and that these can be used as elements for inquiry and teaching of languages -English more specifically- (Sayer, 2010), in our study we were able to encounter elements that can potentially engage students and teachers in critical multilingual and multicultural literacies. Other studies explore other cities and how they bring multilingual and multicultural richness (Mora et al., 2018), for the case of Bogotá, it becomes necessary to document the multicultural and multilingual diversity from its semiotic, textual and discursive configuration. Bogotá, and particularly the historic district, has features that make it a hub for diverse Colombian and international cultures and languages.

Our interest in inquiring about multicultural and multilingual diversity in Bogotá led us to notice literacy practices and multimodal texts present in the city; all of these practices and texts configure the city as a multicultural and multilingual space. Likewise, beyond identifying these linguistic and semiotic resources, we also paid attention to possible curricular applications that teachers can develop when they become aware of these semiotic resources and their sociocultural meanings. We hope that this chapter inspires citizens, teachers, and students to appreciate, interact and read the city as a vibrant text.

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