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Clavijo Olarte, Amparo; Guerrero Nieto, Carmen Helena; Torres Jaramillo, Claudia; Ramírez Galindo, Luz Maribel; Torres Mesa, Nelly Esperanza

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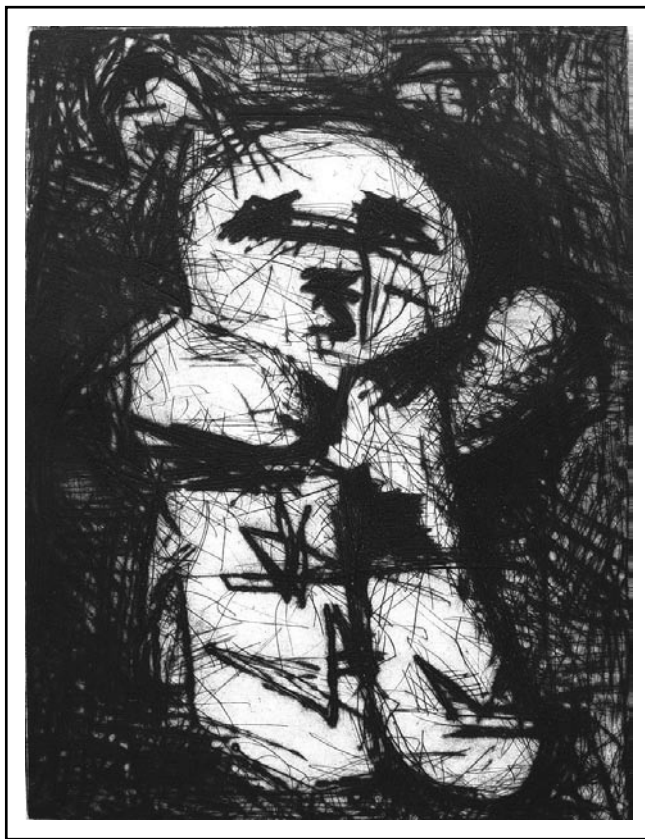
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# Teachers Acting Critically Upon the Curriculum: Innovations that Transform Teaching\*<sup>1</sup>

**Dra. Amparo Clavijo Olarte\*\***

**Mg. Carmen Helena Guerrero Nieto\*\*\***

**Mg. Claudia Torres Jaramillo\*\*\*\***

**Mg. Luz Maribel Ramírez Galindo\*\*\*\*\***

**Mg. Nelly Esperanza Torres Mesa\*\*\*\*\***

This article describes the results of an interpretative qualitative research study in the field of teacher education carried out to identify the processes of innovation in the language curriculum by a group of public school teachers in Bogotá. The innovation process was observed in three stages: identification of the area of intervention, planning, and implementation of the innovation. Data was collected through interviews, videotaped sessions, tutors' reports, and the final documents of the innovation projects. The unit of analysis was the declarative statements of teachers. Two broad aspects of the process of innovation were identified: the process of curricular innovation and the group processes in managing the innovation. In the data analysis, three categories emerged that are described in the discussion of findings: *shifting the focus of the curriculum*, *adopting a curricular perspective to support innovative practices*, and *acting reflectively and dynamically in the innovation*. The results tell us that teachers planned and carried out curricular innovations thinking critically about students' needs and interests. They adopted curricular perspectives that helped them construct and support their classroom projects. Finally, teachers acted reflectively during the implementation of the innovation by adjusting their pedagogical practices in order to benefit students' learning and to achieve their institutional goal.

**Keywords:** curricular innovation processes, public schools involved in innovations, language and literacy, qualitative research in schools, collaborative work between university and schools, cross-curricular work.

Este artículo describe los resultados de un estudio de investigación cualitativo de tipo interpretativo en el campo de las investigaciones en enseñanza. El presente estudio se llevó a cabo con el fin de conocer los procesos de innovación en el currículo del lenguaje desarrollados por docentes de escuelas públicas de Bogotá. El proceso de innovación se observó en tres momentos: identificación del área de intervención, planeación e implementación de la innovación. Los instrumentos de recolección de datos usados fueron entrevistas, reportes parciales y finales de la innovación, reportes de los tutores

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1 This research study was developed during August 2002 and May 2004 and was financed by Colciencias and Universidad Distrital. Partial results of this study have been presented in international and national conferences.



y documentos sobre resultados finales de la innovación. La unidad de análisis fue las frases declarativas de los maestros encontradas en los reportes orales y escritos. Los resultados de la investigación muestran dos aspectos generales: *la innovación curricular* y las *dinámicas de grupo para la gestión de la innovación*. En el proceso de análisis de datos se identificaron tres categorías que se describen en la discusión de hallazgos: *cambios en el enfoque sobre currículo*, *perspectivas curriculares que apoyan las prácticas innovadoras*, y *actuación reflexiva y dinámica en el desarrollo de la innovación*. Los resultados informan que los maestros planearon y llevaron a cabo las innovaciones curriculares de una manera crítica pensando en las necesidades e intereses de sus estudiantes. Ellos adoptaron perspectivas curriculares que permitieron tener un soporte teórico de sus proyectos. Finalmente, los maestros actuaron de manera reflexiva y dinámica durante la implementación de su innovación al hacer ajustes a sus prácticas pedagógicas que benefició el proceso de aprendizaje de sus estudiantes y les permitió alcanzar el objetivo institucional.

Palabras clave: procesos de innovación curricular, escuelas públicas involucradas en innovaciones, lectura y escritura, investigación cualitativa en la escuela, trabajo colaborativo entre universidad y escuela, trabajo interdisciplinario.

Cet article décrit les résultats d'une recherche qualitative de type interprétatif dans le cadre de l'enseignement. L'étude a été menée dans l'optique de connaître les processus d'innovation dans le domaine du langage développé par des enseignants d'écoles publiques de Bogota. On observe trois étapes dans le processus d'innovation : identification de l'ère d'intervention, planification et réalisation de l'innovation. Des entretiens, des présentations partielles et finales de l'innovation, des rapports de tuteurs et des documents sur les résultats finaux de l'innovation ont été utilisés comme instruments de collecte de données.

Les phrases déclaratives des professeurs relevées dans les rapports oraux et écrits ont été analysées. Ces résultats de la recherche montrent deux aspects généraux : l'innovation du plan d'étude et la dynamique du groupe par la gestion de l'innovation. Dans le processus d'analyse de données, ont été identifiées trois catégories décrites dans la discussion sur les découvertes : changement dans l'approche du plan d'étude, perspective des plans d'étude qui appuie les pratiques innovatrices et l'acte réfléchi et dynamique dans le développement de l'innovation. Les résultats informent que les professeurs ont planifié et mené l'innovation du plan d'étude d'une manière critique en pensant aux besoins et intérêts de leurs étudiants. Ils ont adopté des perspectives de plan d'étude qui ont permis d'accéder au support technique de leurs projets. Finalement, les professeurs ont agi de manière réfléchi et dynamique pendant la réalisation de leur innovation en ajustant les pratiques pédagogiques, ce qui a amélioré le processus d'apprentissage de leurs étudiants et leur a permis d'atteindre l'objectif institutionnel.

Mots clés : processus d'innovation de plan d'étude, école publique impliquée dans l'innovation, lecture et écriture, recherche qualitative dans l'école, travail de l'université en collaboration avec l'école, travail interdisciplinaire.



## INTRODUCTION

This article describes the innovative processes carried out by primary and secondary public school teachers with the support of university-based researchers during an academic year. The teachers participated in a professional development program (PDP) on literacy offered by Universidad Distrital and financed by Secretaria de Educación de Bogotá (SED). The structure of the PDP promoted reflection, innovation, and research among the participating teachers. One hundred and twenty teachers who worked in public schools in the district of Bogotá participated in this PDP. They attended classes every Saturday for a period of a year. A description of the basic components of the PDP is illustrated in Appendix 1.

In 19 teachers reflected their commitment to transform their educational practices in order to improve the social and academic conditions of learners.

With this experience, we invite teachers and researchers to reflect upon the possible contributions of planning and implementing a curricular innovation in their schools. We highlight the relevance of collaborative work between university and school in order to support teachers' innovations.

## BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN TEACHER EDUCATION PRACTICES AND RESEARCH

During the last five years (1999 to 2004) the faculty members, from the Master's Program in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English at Universidad Distrital that are part of the national research group *Lectoescritas*, have offered two professional development programs (PDP) in the area of language and literacy to public school teachers in Bogotá. Each one of the teacher education experiences motivated a research project. The first one, by Clavijo (1999), explored teachers' knowledge of literacy learning in Spanish and in English. The second one, developed by Clavijo and her colleagues, focused on the processes of innovation carried out by public school teachers.



These academic experiences contributed to building a bridge between the processes of teacher education and research, to the construction and consolidation of a wealth of local knowledge in the areas of literacy in Spanish and English,<sup>2</sup> and to the growth of the field of language teacher education.

For many decades there has been a divergence between teaching and researching that has been based on the view that the two communities have very different aims. In the field of education, research is supposed to generate knowledge while teachers are to implement this knowledge disregarding the understanding that both can have about teaching, learning, and learners within the organized settings of classrooms and schools (Freeman, 1998). Thus, it is necessary for teaching and research to converge since both are concerned with the process of building knowledge. Therefore, we believe that teaching and research as practices transform teacher educators, classroom teachers, students, institutions, and educational communities in general. Classroom teachers' innovations in our study demonstrate the transformations generated by the relationship between innovative teaching and research.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our study follows a qualitative—interpretive approach to research and aims at observing and understanding processes of innovation carried out by teachers within the area of research on teaching. (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993).

This research design involves the understanding of teaching as a highly complex, context-specific, interactive activity in which differences among classrooms, schools, and communities are critically important. This research approach has been called “classroom ecology” by Schulman cited by Cochran-Smith

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- 2 Some of the publications that report research processes are: *Formación de Maestros Historia y Vida* (2000) Plaza y Janes y Universidad Distrital, *Innovaciones pedagógicas en el área del lenguaje* published by Arfo Editores (2001), *Manual para la Enseñanza de Inglés a niños* (2003), *Creación de hiperhistorias: una estrategia para promover la escritura*. Ikala, (2003), Articles in the Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal (2001), (2002), (2003), (2004).



and Lytle (1993). This perspective values teachers' voices, interpretations, and understandings of their own classroom practices.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1993) ideas on interpretive research provide a detailed description of schools and classroom events and explore teachers' experiences through extensive interviews. The interview process allows researchers to come to a closer understanding of teachers' views, decisions, and actions regarding the aspects involved when carrying out an innovation.

As this study focuses on innovation as perceived by the participants, we decided to use teacher statements, contained in individual and group interviews and in [the] oral and written reports of the projects, as units of analysis.

Considering that the major focus of the study was to examine the process teachers followed to innovate the language curriculum in order to help their students overcome literacy problems, we posed the following questions:

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions are:

1. How did teachers identify the area of intervention?
2. How did they plan the innovation?
3. How did they carry out the plans?

These three questions address three stages in the innovation process which identify the problem to be solved, and plan the pedagogical intervention and implementation of the curricular innovation.

## CONTEXT

Eleven institutions were chosen as the sample for this research study. These institutions were public schools from four school districts: Usme, Ciudad Bolívar, Restrepo, and Kennedy in the city of Bogotá. The students who attend these public schools belong to socio-economic levels one and two. The



neighborhoods that are part of these districts have primary utilities (electricity, water, gas, etc.), but the family income is very low. Parents do not have steady jobs and in general, have poor living conditions. Also there are increasing numbers of displaced populations coming from different regions of the country that have settled in these neighborhoods. The schools located in these districts are coeducational and have an average of 1,200 students in each of the three shifts (morning, afternoon, and some evening shifts).

Administratively, the principal of the school, even though s/he is a teacher, is the manager of the institution, whereas the coordinators are in charge of the academic processes. This is why the principals of the schools did not show much interest and support towards teachers' innovations.

## **Participants**

The participants in this study were forty-five teachers from eleven different schools in four districts in Bogotá, seven university-based researchers, and two international advisors.

### **The teachers**

The forty-five participating teachers worked in primary and secondary education. Twenty-eight were high school teachers from different areas of the curriculum. Ninety percent were female and 10% male, their ages ranged from thirty-five to forty-five years old and they belonged to middle class. All of these teachers held B.A.s in the field of education and about 5% of them have done graduate studies.

The other seventeen teachers worked in primary: 99.7% were female and 0.3% were male, their ages ranged from twenty-five to thirty years old, and they belonged to the middle class. Some teachers held B.A.s in elementary education while others had a high school diploma with an emphasis on primary teaching. Most of them taught Spanish, others English; and still others taught Math, Social Studies, Science, and Computing Science in Spanish.





## **The researchers**

All seven researchers work as teacher educators at different universities, one of them has a Ph.D. in Education, five of them hold an M.A. in Applied Linguistics, and one is an M.A. candidate in Applied Linguistics. They were responsible for collecting data through school visits, carrying out the interviews, analyzing the data, and reporting the findings. They were also committed to presenting the outcomes of the study in different national and international academic events. Three of them had been teacher educators and tutors of the Professional Development Program (PDP).

## **The tutors**

Six tutors were in charge of visiting the different institutions and guiding the innovations being implemented as well as providing theoretical and methodological support. Three of the tutors were also teacher educators in the Professional Development Program in different modules. The other three were teachers that attended the former PDP.

## **International advisors**

The existing international agreement between Distrital University, The University of Arizona, and the professional contact established with the University of Massachusetts—Amherst, permitted an exchange of research experiences that contributed to the development of the research study and the consolidation of the research group. Both advisors belong to a teacher education program in their universities.

The researchers attended a meeting every semester with one of the international advisors at The University of Arizona to discuss the progress of the research study. The advisor from University of Massachusetts at Amherst visited Distrital University for a period of five months as a Fulbright Scholar and participated in the process of data collection.



## PROCEDURES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in different stages. The first stage consisted of gathering and classifying written documents and video recordings. The written documents were the teachers' final reports of projects and the tutors' reports of school visits. The videos were about teachers' presentations of progress and final reports of the projects.

A second stage was the selection of the sample population. From the twenty-six institutions participating in the PDP we only selected eleven and forty-five teachers with the purpose of having 50% of the total group for our data analysis. The criteria used to select a sample of forty-five teachers was: the scope of their innovation project in terms of number of courses, and teachers involved per institution and the interdisciplinary work done.

The third stage was designing instruments for group and individual interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to extend and deepen the data concerning the process of innovation from the teachers' point-of-view.

## INSTRUMENTS

The instruments used to collect data were classified into primary data sources and secondary data sources. We considered as primary data sources, the individual and group interviews, the progress report that was presented orally and videotaped, and the final written reports of the projects. Secondary sources were the field notes taken by tutors during the follow-up sessions at school and the personal information questionnaires.

### Progress and final report

The participants were required to turn in a progress report and a final report of the project. The progress reports were presented to peers and tutors who provided feedback



that contributed to guiding, directing, or reorienting the ideas about how to implement the project more appropriately. The purpose of the progress report was to gather information about the first decisions teachers made to organize the proposal, and how they were incorporating the theory in their projects to transform their practice.

### **Final written report of the project**

A final written report of the innovative project was required. It included information related to the development of the actions proposed in the progress report and the conclusions and evaluation of the innovation. Progress and final oral reports were videotaped and transcribed for the analysis of data.

### **Group Interviews**

Group interviews were carried out with the teachers from the eleven institutions selected to participate in the study forty-five teachers in total. The purpose of group interviews was to gather information about the decisions teachers made regarding three specific stages of the innovation: identifying the area of intervention, planning, and implementing the innovation.

### **Individual Interviews**

Since group interviews partially reported details of the group dynamics, personal involvement, and contributions of individual teachers to the innovative project, participants were invited to the University to submit to an individual interview. The interviews reported teachers' perceptions and feelings about working in a group. Each teacher described his/her role as participant, the tensions he/she felt, and his/her individual evaluation of the outcomes of the project.

### **FIELD NOTES**

Tutors joined in the teachers' process of innovation by carrying out classroom observations that they registered as field notes. The purpose of taking field notes was to have a follow-up of the process in which the teachers were engaged,



and to serve as a means for giving feedback to the teachers during meetings held at school. The school visits mediated the relationship between the school and the university tutors.

## PROCEDURES FOR DATA ANALYSIS

We initiated the process of data analysis by selecting at random, five individual interviews out of the forty-five. These were transcribed in order to become familiar with the data, to identify common patterns, and to establish criteria for further analysis. After this preliminary analysis we analyzed the other forty individual interviews. We continued searching for the common patterns we found in the individual interviews in other information sources such as the group interviews, video transcripts of progress and final reports, and in the teachers' final written reports of their projects. This allowed us to confirm or disregard the preliminary categories that emerged in the first level of analysis. Color-coding was a helpful strategy to identify the categories from the raw data.

In order to determine the categories of the study, we took into account Guba and Lincoln (1981) who consider that the categories that one constructs should be internally homogenous; that is, all items in a single category ought to be similar. Categories should also be heterogeneous—"differences among categories ought to be bold and clear" (93).

The process of triangulation in our study occurred simultaneous to in-depth analysis of the data. Denzin (1970) defines methodological triangulation as the process of combining multiple methods of collecting data such as interviews, observations, and physical evidence to study the same unit in order to achieve validity. This is precisely the kind of triangulation we took into account. We triangulated the data collected from group and individual interviews, videos of progress and final presentations of teachers' projects, and the project final papers.

The final categories emerged after a long and continuous process of reading and rereading the data to discover the outstanding features of the process of innovation carried out by teachers. The categories that emerged were:



- *shifting the focus of the school curriculum,*
- *adopting a curricular perspective to support innovative practices,*
- *acting reflectively and dynamically in the innovation.*

They relate to the three stages of the innovation process: identifying the area of intervention, planning the innovation, and carrying out the innovation.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study show that teachers developed actions related to two main aspects: the curricular innovation and its management. These two aspects characterized the three stages of the innovation: identifying the area of intervention, planning the innovation, and implementing it.

In relation to the first, we identified a shift of focus towards a curriculum more centered on learners' needs. Teachers' innovative projects showed pedagogical actions that transformed the purpose of schooling in terms of enhancing students' literacy development by engaging learners, parents, and teachers in different literacy practices. (See Appendix 2).

The findings also report that different curricular perspectives supported teachers' practices to plan and implement their innovations. The curricular perspectives used by teachers included a view of language and literacy across the curriculum that promoted a participatory construction of the language curriculum as a means to solve problems identified in the institutions as well as a cross-curricular integrative approach. In relation to the process of managing the innovation in the three stages, we found that teachers took actions to organize and administer the curricular innovation. These included seeking support, establishing alliances, forming a group, dealing with conflicts, and making adjustments to the curriculum.

The following categories synthesize our understanding of how the process of innovation unfolds.



## Categories

**Table 1. Categories of data analysis**

| Research Questions                                  | Categories   |
|---|--|
| How did teachers identify the area of intervention? | 1. Shifting the focus of the curriculum<br>1.1 Critical curricular issues:<br>1.1.1 Students' socio-economic needs,<br>1.1.2 Students' affective needs,<br>1.1.3 Students' learning needs.   |
| How did teachers plan the innovation?               | 2. Adopting a curricular perspective to support innovative practices.<br>2.1 Language and literacy across the curriculum.<br>2.1.1 Cross-curricular work as an integrative approach.<br>2.1.2 Extending literacy practices within the language area. |
| How did teachers carry out the innovation?          | 3. Acting reflectively and dynamically in the innovation<br>3.1 Using and expanding a theoretical platform as a support to teachers' innovations.<br>3.2 Making adjustments in the practices.  |

### 1. Shifting the focus of the curriculum.

This category aims at answering the first research question: How did teachers identify the area of intervention? In this regard, the data shows that teachers' initial actions focused on an interest in fulfilling the learner's needs identified in the results of the *Evaluación de Competencias Básicas*. Teachers' considerations of issues that affected the students' learning process such as socioeconomic, affective and learning needs, evidenced the shift to a more student-centered curriculum.

The data reports that teachers were sensitive to critical issues that affected students' learning. Teachers perceived themselves as important agents of change in society and realized that their teaching could have an important effect on students' lives, so they acted critically upon the issues they identified as affecting the educational community. They considered their projects as a way



to respond to students' socio-economic needs, affective needs, and learning needs. We now examine each one of them in detail.

## 1.1 Critical Curricular Issues

### 1.1.1 Students' socio-economic needs:

The teachers who participated in this study worked with marginalized populations. Teachers were aware that the school does not always fulfill students' expectations regarding ways to overcome socio-economic problems, since class content is usually far away from discussing aspects of real life. The socio-economic context, as the first issue considered in teachers' school innovations, is illustrated as follows:

*The socio-economic stratum of the populations assisted are medium-low and low. The family pattern that prevails is a single mother and a disintegrated family. The family atmosphere is mainly characterized by verbal and physical violence. The working conditions of the population are unemployment and underemployment; the most frequent work for men is unskilled labor and menial work. The household is supported by one of the two spouses or by a single mother. They usually live in rented houses and frequently in a risky environment.*<sup>3</sup> (CED Francisco de Paula Santander)

The socio-economic issue was a key aspect teachers considered when designing their innovation since they felt committed to giving their students tools to be able to transform their own reality. The curricular innovation was intended to provide alternative actions to their socio-economic difficulties. An example of this is the project carried out in Confederacion Suiza which encouraged a small family business to produce chocolates that were sold in the school's neighborhood and helped to increase the family's income.

The data showed that teachers viewed literacy problems as connected to the socio-economic context of students and expressed their commitment to help solve the problem. This fact relates to the political nature of curriculum as

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3 Translation done by authors.



Beyer, and Apple (1998) note: “teachers have to select from a vast universe of possible knowledge, of designing environments to make it accessible, of making it meaningful to students.”

### **1.1.2. Students’ affective needs**

The second issue considered was students’ affective needs. We could infer from students’ economic situations that there were affective problems related to poverty. These affective needs were considered when selecting the area of intervention. Low self-esteem and lack of time devoted by parents to their children were the most common issues identified by teachers, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

The environmental conditions, the analysis of weak family relationships, inadequate use of free time, generate students’ low self-esteem that has an effect on all aspects of school life, academic performance, and little motivation on the processes of reading and writing. (Floresta Sur)<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the project from which the excerpt was taken, was oriented towards developing values that would help foster tolerance, responsibility, and respect towards others.

### **1.1.3 Students’ Learning needs**

The third issue is related to students’ learning needs reflected in the low scores in the standardized tests applied by the Secretaria de Educación to give account to students’ language competencies. This situation required teachers to plan their teaching in a way that learning would be meaningful to students and language competences would be developed to address their daily needs. Reading and writing became the means by which teachers identified students’ weaknesses and also allowed teachers to understand learners’ lives.

The following table illustrates the problems addressed by teachers and the objectives they formulated in their innovative projects.

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4 Translation done by authors.





**Table 2. Description of problematic situations that motivated teachers to design their innovations**

| Institution Name                      | Problem Description   | Objectives  |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Colegio Distrital Carlos Arango Velez | Students show lack of creativity in writing other than formal   | Promoting cross-curricular reading-writing activities, critical thinking, generating positive environment at institutional level                              |
| Colegio Distrital Usme                | Most students show literal reading comprehension, few inferential, and less argumentative reading comprehension           | Encouraging writing activities through individual experiences, anecdotes, and oral tradition  |
| CEDID Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo          | Low reading comprehension, low student motivation for reading   | Promoting creativity in students' written production through intertextuality  |
| CED Confederacion Suiza Lucero Sur    | Lack of cultural identity, aggressiveness in group, graffiti, oral tradition  | Qualify argumentative competence  |
| CED Antonia Santos II                 | Students' difficulty to express themselves verbally and in a written form, lack of motivation towards reading and writing | To develop imagination and creativity through stories, rhymes, tongue-twisters, and poems   |
| CEDID Francisco de Paula Santander    | Difficulties in segmenting words due to influence of oral language  | To encourage appropriate writing through different activities   |
| Colegio Floresta Sur                  | Students' lack of values such as respect, responsibility, and tolerance   | To promote social values through meaningful literacy practices  |
| CED Guillermo León Valencia           | Low reading engagement, lack of motivation for reading as well as for writing   | To expand the reading and writing practices beyond the classroom, to explore the city as curriculum content   |
| CED Estanislao Zuleta                 | Children view writing as repetitive and mechanical. Writing does not communicate feelings, own experiences, self-esteem   | To promote writing to communicate feelings and own ideas, to promote self-recognition as authors, to involve parents in the writing process of their children |



|                  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|
| CED Villa Gloria | Schools don't allow children to have real contact with books. Students see books as objects that don't belong to them. Due to the fact that there are no books in the children's homes, they end up perceiving them as something they can't even touch | To develop children's sensitivity and to improve their reading comprehension through short stories. To create reading strategies to allow children to get in contact with literature. To provide space and time to encourage children to write their own texts |
| CED La Chucua    | Lack of identity and values, few reading experiences of children, there were no books at home  | To promote reading of literature. To develop a joy for reading   |

The critical issues addressed by teachers in the development of their curricular innovations support the shift of focus they made to a more student-centered curriculum in their institutions. We interpret their critical thinking and acting upon the socio-economic, affective, and learning needs of students as a commitment that reflects the epistemological, ideological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of their teaching profession.

Beyer and Apple (1998) illustrate the complexity of the curriculum by defining some of its key components. The epistemological dimension addresses the questions of what should count as knowledge and as knowing. The ideological dimension focuses on what knowledge is of greatest value. The aesthetic dimension deals with how we link the curriculum to the biography and personal meanings of students. Finally, the ethical dimension of the curriculum addresses the way we treat others responsibly and justly in education.

What counted as knowledge in teachers' innovations was related to different ways of approaching language and literacy learning. Teachers and learners approached language and literacy through experiences that included "reading" the city of Bogotá as text and relating it to other types of school learning. Literacy became understood as a way of constructing knowledge in all the areas of the curriculum by building students' awareness of the importance of local history through the exploration of oral traditions, constructing life histories as knowledge that serves to reflect upon societal values, among others.

In terms of knowledge, teachers' innovations showed that the knowledge that they provided to students through different possibilities for learning to learn, learning



to think, and learning to solve current and future problems, was most valuable. Some examples of innovations carried out by school teachers illustrate this aspect. A group of primary school teachers oriented the development of children's writing towards the construction of children's life histories that allowed them to reflect about who they are and where they are heading. Through this writing experience students became aware of their strengths, needs, and possibilities.

Another group of teachers developed an innovation with high school students in which knowledge from different areas of the curriculum was applied in the solution of personal and local needs. For example, knowledge of accounting, technology, language, science, physics, and chemistry was used to plan and design small businesses that permitted students to improve their standard of living. Students' experiential learning extended their understanding of the content of each one of the areas of the curriculum in a meaningful way and served to demonstrate how teachers integrated the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the curriculum in the development of their innovations. Learners could also appreciate the potential of literacy in the realization of goals in their personal and professional lives<sup>5</sup>.

From the previous discussion we conclude that by focusing on a more student-centered curriculum, teachers showed their strong commitment to transform their practices in public education. Following Beyer and Apple's contributions on curriculum dimensions and the importance of teaching as a thoughtful practice, we consider that the shift of focus was permeated by teachers' decisions that involved the epistemological, ideological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions.

## **2. Adopting a Curricular perspective to support innovative practices.**

This category responds to the second question related to how the teachers planned their innovations. Teachers assumed a critical stance towards the

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5 For more information about the innovative projects(,) refer to our publication *Innovaciones Pedagógicas en el área del lenguaje* by Clavijo, A., 2001, Editor.



curriculum in order to adopt a perspective that would guide the development of projects centered on students' needs and interests. This framework counted on teachers' previous knowledge in relation to teaching and learning as well as on the input received during the PDP. It reflected the importance given by teachers to connect language and literacy across the curriculum.

## **2.1 Language and literacy across the curriculum**

Through the work carried out by the teachers in the PDP, new understandings of language and literacy emerged to conceive literacy practices as more than just coding and decoding print. For Carson (1992) and Harris (1990) in Johns (1997), literacy "relates to social context, the roles and the communities of texts and readers and writers" (2) Additionally, Goodman (1999) indicates that literacy development is more than reading and writing, it includes aspects of the individual's history, culture, and social environment.

Teachers realized that reading and writing not only concerned the study of Spanish but they were also present in other areas of the curriculum. Teachers became more aware that in other subjects of the curriculum there is a lot of reading and writing involved, and therefore the development of literacy in students is the responsibility of all the educators within the school community.

As stated above, language and literacy are present across all the areas of the curriculum and in various ways. Taking into account the projects developed by teachers, we could see that language and literacy permeated subject areas other than Spanish. Some projects evidenced the literacy practices in different ways, for example, students developed literacy for computers, literacy for different types of texts (like reading the city), and literacy for work, as illustrated in the following statement:

*"I am from natural sciences, I worked in Chemistry and Biology, although in the institution there is food technology, so another colleagues assumed this part of the technology. I tried to show the most important part of science that we could integrate to the project, to see how argumentation from the science point-of- view is different from argumentation on the linguistic*



*and the math level, because of the fact that science is governed by other parameters” (CED Confederación Suiza).<sup>6</sup>*

In the following paragraphs we will deal with the subdivisions of this subcategory that are cross-curricular, and contribute to an integrative approach, extending literacy practices within the language area.

### **2.1.1 Cross-curricular work as an integrative approach**

In the planning stage teachers realized that working together with teachers from other areas strongly influenced the connections students could make about the content of the different subjects. Through the data we could observe that this involvement was noticeable in two ways: either by inviting other teachers to be part of the project, such as in the innovation carried out by CED Confederación Suiza in which twelve teachers from different areas took part; or in the case of CED Guillermo Leon Valencia, in which the teacher decided to deal with the content of other subject areas within her project.

Regarding the importance of cross-curricular work, we can see that learning becomes meaningful when in the process of learning the language, students handle real meaning in context rather than isolated bits of the language (Halliwell, 2002).

In order to be able to carry out cross-curricular work, teachers used different strategies. Among these, we could identify the establishment of alliances and the formation of groups.

To establish alliances, teachers constructed relationships between and among the members of the innovative group and the other members of the community during the planning stage of the project. Teachers realized the importance of cross-curricular work when they interacted with colleagues from other areas. The excerpt presented above illustrates teacher involvement in establishing language as the center of curricular activities in the different subject areas.

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6 Translation done by the authors.



Another strategy teachers used to be able to implement cross-curricular work was the formation of groups. During the PDP, teachers from the same institutions formed innovative groups. The groups ranged in size from three to twelve teachers from different subject areas. By organizing the groups, teachers started to value collaboration and recognize the possible difficulties they could have as a group.

### **2.1.2 Extending literacy practices within the language area.**

Some innovations were planned to concentrate on students' needs to become readers and writers. Interestingly, these innovations were planned and implemented mainly by primary school teachers. The focus of primary school teachers' innovations varied and included: reading and writing stories with children as was the case of CED Villa Gloria; writing letters to parents to establish a closer connection between children and parents as in CED Estanislao Zuleta; guided creative writing in CED Antonia Santos II, and relating sounds and letters to examine segmentation in the writing process by preschool and third grade children in CEDID Francisco de Paula Santander.

Primary school teachers devoted a great deal of time and effort to construct a positive literacy environment for children. For example, the group of primary school teachers from CED Estanislao Zuleta, considered that involving other teachers and parents in children's literacy was strategic in order to find support from the members of the community for their project. The following excerpt illustrates the support received from the community:

*“Yes, they have to get involved, we have to involve all teachers and the rest of the Zuletista community, but I think that we limited ourselves to working with the children. We did not even involve the parents, we did not participate and this is going to be difficult. It is going to be difficult to wait for others to do things and to commit themselves if they do not see results, if they do not see that they also have to get involved. (CED Estanislao Zuleta)”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Translation was done by authors.



Finally, we consider that the curricular perspectives that supported teachers' innovative projects were concentrated around practices that demonstrated cross-curricular work implemented by some groups of high school teachers. Newer literacy practices that promoted the education of primary school children and their parents as readers and writers, were implemented by some groups of primary school teachers.

The description of this stage corresponds to its implementation. It was characterized by reflective and dynamic actions carried out by the participating teachers.

### **3. Acting reflectively and dynamically in the innovation**

The implementation stage began with the introduction of innovations in institutions or classrooms. It is defined as the period when teachers carried out the designed plans. In relation to the curricular innovation, teachers used their theoretical platform and made adjustments to their practices. In regards to innovation management, teachers sought support from tutors and teachers from other areas. They consolidated alliances for collaborative work, consolidated the innovative team, and dealt with conflicts. This stage followed a cycle of engagement, reflection, assessment, and adjustment which are recurrent practices.

The description of this stage responds to the third research question: How did teachers carry out their plans for innovation? The first aspect dealt with by teachers in this stage is the continuous construction of a theoretical platform.

#### **3.1 Using and expanding a theoretical platform as a support to teachers' innovations**

The theoretical platform is seen as a process of teachers' constant knowledge building. It is perceived along a continuum where teachers enriched and expanded "three qualitatively yet interrelated domains of knowledge about teaching: instructional, pedagogical and curricular knowledge" Kreber and Cranton (2000). Teachers used their existing and their new knowledge of the

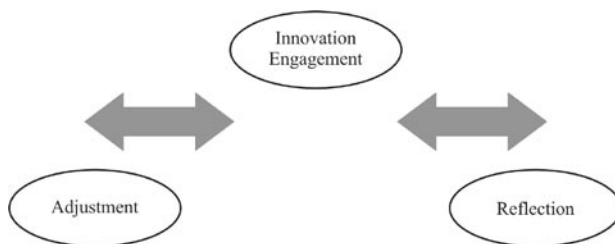


three domains to carry out their innovations. They used and expanded their knowledge of the strategies used in teaching. Their pedagogical knowledge was increased as they improved their understanding of their students and how they learned. They also became more aware of the purposes, goals, and rationale of their innovations. Besides developing those three domains, they expanded their knowledge of their subject matter as they used new approaches to literacy to support their innovation. This process started in the planning stage and was evidenced along the implementation stage when teachers mainly used the socio-psycholinguistic, the semiotic, and the psychogenetic approaches to support their innovations.

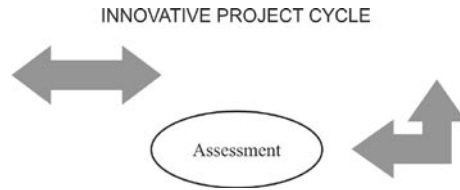
The use of these theories by teachers was shown in their practice when they considered students' previous knowledge, introduced new ways of exploring reading and writing in their classrooms, and invited others to get involved in interdisciplinary work. The construction of the theoretical platform was noticed when teachers shared the development of their projects during different sessions and in their final written reports. In the presentation sessions they received feedback from their peers and tutors that served to clarify, orient, or re-direct the project being implemented.

### 3.2 Making adjustments in the practices: a cycle appears that leads to transformation

Unlike the two previous stages of the innovation, during implementation, a dynamic cycle was identified that involved four stages: innovation engagement, reflection, assessment, and adjustment. These stages were characterized by continuous inquiry about learners' needs and teachers' practices, taking into account the socio-economic context, affective factors, and the resources available.







*Innovation engagement* started when teachers first used their new practices or innovations. That is, they experienced the new practice. *Reflection* was a key aspect of the cycle since it allowed teachers to think about their new classroom experience during and after its completion. They shared their experiences and discussed their understanding about their innovations with their colleagues. An individual and group *assessment* took place by teachers regarding their new practices and the way these were being implemented. Assessment allowed teachers to make the necessary *adjustments* to their innovative projects along the process. The cycle allowed teachers to acknowledge and value the positive outcomes while implementing their projects.

During this cycle, teachers supported each other when facing obstacles or difficulties. There was also mutual encouragement to continue developing innovations when their motivation was affected by external factors such as lack of institutional support, lack of time to work on the project, and personal and group tensions.

During the implementation of the innovation, some aspects of management were important: seeking and providing support, consolidating alliances for collaborative work, consolidating a team, and dealing with conflicts were identified. Teachers sought support from tutors and tutors provided it through visits to the different institutions where they could observe how the projects were being implemented. Consequently, the tutors offered feedback to the teachers on the matter. Through this contact, tutors were able to identify the areas that required more support and provided various theoretical sources that contributed to the implementation of the innovations. In other cases tutors helped to refocus the projects. In addition, tutors encouraged teachers to reflect upon the type of decisions made along the process and their implications. Taking into account that projects required working collaboratively, teachers from different areas worked together and some cases, parents were also involved.



The consolidation of alliances was achieved through the cooperation and participation of teachers from other areas generating interdisciplinary work that implied teachers working together from different perspectives in order to reach the common goals stated in the projects.

Consolidating alliances and teams for collaborative work is one of the main aspects to consider when developing an innovative project. In the implementation phase, some of the groups were consolidated as teams since they stated common purposes and goals. They assumed specific roles and responsibilities to develop their innovative projects. The most common teachers' roles identified in this study were the following: leader, theory searcher, doer, planner, and mediator. The *leader* usually guided the team and was clear about the objectives to be reached during the implementation of the innovation. Some teachers were keen to look for theoretical sources that would help support the innovation (*theory searchers*) while others preferred to do more practical tasks (*doers*), i.e., note taking, drawing. Other teachers took the initiative and proposed and *planned* key aspects of their innovative projects. Others assumed the role of *mediators* since they handled and helped solve conflicts within the team.

The importance of consolidating a team had an impact on the achievements reached by some of the institutions compared to others. Some of the teachers' reflections showed how worthwhile it was to be part of a team sharing and supporting each other to reach common goals for the benefit of their students, as well as dealing with obstacles that in some cases generated conflicts.

In this particular study, three main factors that caused conflict during the implementation phase were identified: time constraints, differences in personality, and teachers' beliefs. In relation to the first aspect, the lack of time became one of the main obstacles that generated tensions that teachers had to cope with during this process. Distinctive individual qualities of a person as well as different skills to develop tasks generated tensions that affected relationships between and among members. Some teachers also had difficulty assuming the challenges posed by the innovation since it implied adjusting their traditional practices. It was not easy for them to make decisions on whether to continue or to abandon certain practices. As one of the teachers mentioned when expressing the way she dealt with her teaching dilemma:



*“...For me it has been difficult and troublesome, maybe because I have left that inflexibility and I have focused, to a great extent, on the children’s free production, where they can produce their writing, that is, I think a little more like Emilia Ferreiro and I share this, that children learn to talk, they also learn to write, but unfortunately, we do not think alike, and there have been times in which maybe, in a meeting, with my colleagues, they said that children should have certain knowledge, which it is legally necessary and for me it is troublesome, that is because I say, my children maybe do not have this line, but they bring many other things. Then there have been times in which I leave what I am doing and I focus on the vowels again, but I realize that it does not, that maybe the meetings here have richness, one says yes, it serves the purpose and I continue, but there have been times in which I drop it and I return” (CED Estanislao Zuleta).<sup>8</sup>*

Knowing how to solve conflicts within a group that has stated goals and objectives for students’ benefit, is an important feature when consolidating a team. In most cases, working for students’ benefit became the most important motivation for teachers as they felt rewarded by their students’ progress and the support given by parents, especially since support from school principals was almost non-existent.

Each group dynamic determined how cohesive the group was and how they were on the way to becoming a team and not just an aggregation of group members. Teams were characterized by the presence of a leader, a clear work plan, a strong commitment to achieving the goals of the project, consensus on the objectives, efficient ways of dealing with tensions and conflicts, and the length of time that they had been working together.

## CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of curricular innovation presented in this research study indicate that teachers became problem posers and problem solvers, and oriented the process of innovation on students’ needs and their social context. They enacted the epistemological, ideological, political, aesthetic, and ethical

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<sup>8</sup> Translation was done by authors



dimensions of the curriculum as informed practitioners with a purpose in mind—to transform the language and literacy curriculum and to provide richer literacy experiences to students.

We noticed that teachers realized that a pedagogical intervention in the curriculum could have a positive impact on students' learning, and therefore they became committed and invested in the innovation.

As researchers, we observed the process of innovation in three stages. We identified the area of intervention, and the planning and implementation of innovation permitted us to understand the complexity of conceiving a curricular innovation and managing it under specific conditions. Group dynamics were a critical part of innovation. We also identified that teachers' conceptualization of the nature of literacy and their teaching of literacy was transformed and it is evident in their statements and in the description of their innovations (See Appendix 1). The results of innovation show teachers as thinkers committed to bettering the education of their students. We also identified the strategies that teachers used in order to get support from tutors, parents, and other teachers to be able to carry out the innovation successfully. They overcame obstacles by listening to each other and reaching a consensus, by recognizing leadership roles in a team, and by assuming responsibilities.

Finally, we consider that further research can be done on the sustainability and impact of an innovation and to document the process of teacher change as a result of a pedagogical intervention.

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## THE AUTHORS

\*\* Dra. Amparo Clavijo Olarte is a full professor and researcher at the School of Sciences and Education at Universidad Distrital. She is currently the director of the Master's Program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL, the editorial director of the Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, and the main researcher of the group *Lectoescrinautas* recognized by Colciencias.  
Correo electrónico: [aclavijo@andinet.com](mailto:aclavijo@andinet.com)



- \*\*\* Carmen Helena Guerrero is an assistant professor in the Master's program in Applied Linguistics at Universidad Distrital.  
Correo electrónico: carguero@yahoo.com
- \*\*\*\* Claudia Torres Jaramillo is an assistant professor in the Master's program in Applied Linguistics at Universidad Distrital.  
Correo electrónico: ctorresjaramillo@yahoo.com
- \*\*\*\*\* Maribel Ramirez Galindo is a full-time teacher of English in a public school for Secretaria de Educacion del Distrito and she is also a lecturer at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in the Modern Language Department.  
Correo electrónico: mbelra@yahoo.com
- \*\*\*\*\* Esperanza Torres Mesa is currently the director of the language department at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and a former professor of the Foreign Language Department at Universidad Distrital.  
Correo electrónico: ntorres@javeriana.edu.co



## Appendix 1

### Components and modules implemented in the pdp on literacy

| COMPONENTS    | Introductory module  | Module 1:<br>Teachers and<br>students as readers<br>and writers                                     | Module 2:<br>Recent theories<br>and approaches<br>to research in rea-<br>ding and writing                        | Module 3:<br>Curricular inte-<br>gration  |
|---------------|--|---|--|---|
| Investigation | Teachers identified<br>problematic<br>situations that<br>required attention in<br>their schools  | Establishing<br>relationships<br>between teachers'<br>literacy histories<br>and their practice      | Analysis of the<br>type of projects<br>that can be imple-<br>mented in their<br>own institutions                 | Identification<br>of areas for<br>integration and<br>co-working                         |
| Innovation    | Teachers are presen-<br>ted with new ways<br>of using technology<br>in communication.<br>With the purpose of<br>creating teachers'<br>networks | Changes in their<br>concepts of<br>literacy and the<br>implications in<br>new ways of<br>teaching   | Preparing the<br>fields for<br>innovation and<br>change  | Presentation of<br>proposals and the<br>plans of action<br>in their own<br>institutions |
| New knowledge | With the use of<br>technology teachers<br>would have access<br>to new information.<br>This would permit<br>teachers to work in<br>groups       | Psycho-socio-<br>linguistic and pe-<br>dagogical aspects<br>of the reading and<br>writing processes | New paradigms<br>around the tea-<br>ching of reading<br>and writing<br>New tendencies<br>to do classroom<br>work | Language and the<br>curriculum<br>Models for<br>curricular inte-<br>gration             |



## Appendix 2

### Description of Innovations

| Institution Name                      | Project Name  | Teachers Involved | Grade Level              | Scopes of the innovation and areas involved  | Outcomes   |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| Colegio Distrital Carlos Arango Velez | Produccion Escrita, Creatividad e intertextualidad                              | 3                 | 3                        | All curricular areas, all teachers and students involved. Spanish, Philosophy, Science, Counseling   | Recognition of the importance of reading and writing in all subjects as forms of expression and communication English considered from a holistic approach  |
| Colegio Distrital Usme                | Ando...Narrando!  | 3                 | 1                        | Interdisciplinary work Spanish, language, art, music, physical education, local community  | Students recognized their local history and identity through oral tradition<br>They increased the amount of reading and writing activities creatively  |
| CEDID Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo          | Las Practicas Lectoras y Escritoras: Una oportunidad para crear mundos posibles | 4                 | all                      | Sixth, tenth and eleventh grades   | Increase in production and quality of non-formal student texts Teachers' recognition of students' potential for writing texts other than formal  |
| CED Confederacion Suiza Lucero Sur    | Argumento sobre lo que leo  | 12                | 4                        | Curricular areas: Spanish, math, computer technology, chemistry, environmental education, food technology, social science, arts, accounting. | Multidisciplinary work built academic community towards same goal (development of argumentation) Projects allowed implementation of business management within curriculum, thus constituting vital tools for students' future job opportunities. |
| CED Antonia Santos II                 | Escribiendo Nos Hacemos Grandes   | 4                 | preschool and elementary | All curricular areas, all teachers and students, plus parent involvement was achieved  | Children used their everyday language to express themselves Students' motivation was perceived to read and write—this experience was seen as very meaningful for students and teachers<br>Children developed a sense of belonging to the school. |





|                                    |  |   |                       |  |   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------|--|---|
| CEDID Francisco de Paula Santander | La Segmentación  | 4 | transition            | Transition and third grade students groups A and B   | Students related sounds and letters in Transition<br>In third grade, writing was developed by students  |
| Colegio Floresta Sur               | Cartografía de Valores   | 3 | 9 and 6               | Social Studies, Spanish and English, Ethics  | The reflections generated from the different workshops provided the students with the possibility to reorient their life histories by writing meaningfully.   |
| CED Guillermo León Valencia        | La ciudad, mi bitácora cultural  | 3 | 9 and 6               | Spanish, English, Arts, social studies, 6th and 9th graders<br>Parents were involved in the innovation | Students broadened their understanding of literacy through “reading” the city   |
| CED Estanislao Zuleta              | Jugando a escribir, escribo  | 5 | Preschool, 2, 4 and 5 | All areas, parents   | Children became interested in writing since they were the real protagonists of their stories<br>Writings reflected sensitivity to their surroundings<br>Children considered writing as an effective instrument of communication |
| CED Villa Gloria                   | ¿Cuál es tu cuento?  | 2 | 2 and 5               | Second and fifth grades<br>Children other teachers   | Change the culture of having the books on a shelf with no access to children<br>Other colleagues followed the example   |
| CED La Chucua                      | La Creación de Textos Escritos a partir de la lectura de textos literarios cortos. | 4 | all                   | Students, teachers, and administrators   | Reconceptualization of reading and writing<br>Children developed a joy of reading   |

