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Six blocks down, take a left at the corner: Learning to teach English learners outside the school walls

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Abstract

In this article we report on a three-staged teacher education model, designed to support the development of culturally responsive teaching practice in teacher candidates who are preparing to work with multilingual learners. The creative focus of this model is most pronounced in our effort to enable teacher candidates to "get out of context" of the school setting and to envision curricular possibilities by looking to the community. Our teacher education model assists teacher candidates (TCs) to learn community-based culturally responsive teaching pedagogies for multilingual learners through (1) supporting culturally responsive teaching practice in the abstract, (2) engaging practice that pushes past the confines of the school walls, and (3) putting it all together in a community-focused unit of instruction. We advocate for the creative potential of positioning TCs' learning outside of the school walls and inside the community. For each stage of our model, we provide examples of practice using data from a unit of instruction titled *Making a Living—Making a Life* that teacher candidates co-created with the authors and experienced teachers. The unit was designed for a summer program in a U.S. Midwestern community for approximately one hundred fourth- to eighth-grade English learners.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Beginning and experienced teachers often struggle to learn in and from multicultural settings to design culturally responsive curriculum (Hyland, 2009; Sugarman, 2010). In teacher education programs, teacher candidates (henceforth TCs) may learn *about* culturally responsive (Villegas &

Lucas, 2002), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2006), or culturally sustaining (Alim & Paris, 2017) perspectives in their coursework, yet transforming this knowledge into practice remains a puzzle (Khasnabis, Goldin, & Ronfeldt, 2018). As teacher educators in a K-8 English teaching endorsement program, our goal is to create contexts where our TCs can learn to put culturally responsive perspectives into practice—and ultimately to have both the knowledge and pedagogical skills to make culturally responsive teaching central to their work as teachers.

Here, we describe the context and activity for this work–a summer learning program for approximately one hundred fourth- to eighth-grade multilingual students where TCs work along-side experienced teachers and university faculty to design and teach a community-based, culturally responsive summer curriculum. The very phrase *summer school* may bring to mind steamy class-rooms, crumpled worksheets, and languid bodies draped across desks. Yet we have found that summer school can be a creative, community-based context that includes noisy, food-filled gather-ings of teachers, parents, students; sweaty expeditions into the community; and frenzied final edit-ing of multimodal writing projects. Summer is full of creative possibility, and can be a space of opportunity both for children's learning (McCombs et al., 2011) and for TCs' learning.

We have also found that through a series of well-supported activities, TCs can begin to see themselves as creators and enactors of culturally responsive pedagogies. As we have developed teacher education practices to support this work, we have posed these questions:

- What interactions with families and the community will support TCs' learning?
- How can we support TCs' interactions in the community?
- How can connections with community members ultimately contribute to a culturally responsive community-focused summer school curriculum?

In the following pages, we focus on the teacher education practices and learning of TCs in this summer context, offering both the theoretical underpinnings of this community-focused work and images of practice. We also provide a description of a three-staged teacher education model that we have designed to support TCs in learning community-based culturally responsive teaching ped-agogies for multilingual learners: (1) supporting culturally responsive teaching practice in the abstract; (2) engaging practice that pushes past the confines of the school walls; and (3) putting it all together in a community-focused unit of instruction. We advocate for the creative potential of positioning TCs' learning outside of the school walls—and inside the community.

2 | THE SUMMER TEACHING CONTEXT

The Summer ESL Academy (SESLA), now in its eighth year, serves approximately one hundred fourth- to eighth-grade English learners (ELs) in a mid-sized U.S. Midwestern city. Students come from multiple elementary schools and one middle school, and between 65% and 80% are eligible for free or reduced breakfast and lunch in the 3-week program. The majority of students have Spanish as their home language; other home languages include Vietnamese, Arabic, Hindi, Ben-gali, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Bambara, French, and Portuguese.

The SESLA teaching staff includes eight experienced teachers certified in English as a Second language (ESL) and 10 TCs. TCs have completed a 1-year, intensive, graduate K-8 teacher certifi-cation program and are adding the ESL endorsement to their credentials. In this discussion, we focus on the teacher education program design that supports the learning of these TCs.

In our work as teacher educators and designers of academic language and content programs for multilingual students, we design rigorous and engaging summer programs for children, drawing on the creativity of teachers and children to create a new version of summer school. Together, we resist the idea of summer school as remediation for "limited English proficient" students. Rather, we strive to construct culturally responsive programs that position multilingualism as an asset, and that envision opportunities for children to see themselves, their families, and their communities as "filled with possibilities" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 31).

Our framework for culturally responsive, project-based literacy curriculum design for multilingual learners (Khasnabis, Reischl, Ambrosino, Bufford, & Schlundt-Bodien, 2018; Reischl & Khasnabis, 2016) is illustrated in an online video (Khasnabis, Reischl, & Stull, 2016; see https://youtube/7uK7bxmpAIk) and grounded in the following set of principles:

Principle 1: Draw on community resources. ESL teachers learn to perceive community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and to design literacy instruction that recognizes and builds upon community-based knowledge (Purcell-Gates, 2013).

Principle 2: Integrate multi-genre texts and purposeful writing. ESL teachers engage students in reading and writing in multiple genres and with authentic purpose in students' lives (Duke, 2014).

Principle 3: Create opportunities for rigorous and meaningful academic learning. ESL teachers teach the linguistic patterns found in a range of genres, helping students understand language used in school settings to engage in academic content (Bunch, 2006; Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Principle 4: Engage students in high-quality experiences with multimodal literacies. ESL teachers use a broad range of media, technology, and symbol systems and integrate reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing in ways that provide opportunities for exploration and expression of identities, improvement of academic learning, development of critical literacy and perspectives, and connection of in- and out-of-school knowledge and experiences (Yi, 2014).

Our design efforts build upon the work of scholars (see, e.g., Epstein, 1998; Heath, 1983; Hawkins, Johnson, Jones, & Legler, 2008; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) who have shown that high-quality learning opportunities must be founded upon efforts to engage with families and community members to ground the curriculum in the contexts of students' lives. The driving notion behind the curriculum is that our students' communities are rich with resources and knowledge bases (Principle 1). This is important to state because immigrant communities, especially those that are socioeconomically disadvantaged, are often seen for their deficits rather than their strengths. Instead, we aim to illuminate what we know to be the assets of immigrant communities.

We also aim for students to have opportunities for rigorous academic learning (Principle 3), while using mediums and topics that have real purpose in their lives (Principle 2). For example, we have provided students with opportunities to develop skills in the persuasive academic writing genre by helping them write promotional brochures to be used for businesses in their community.

Finally, we find that when ELs are boxed into a particular medium—for example, speaking— they cannot necessarily provide illustrative evidence of all that they know. But when students use and create with multiple modalities (Principle 4), for example with written or audiovisual supports, they can build upon what they know and more richly convey their thinking and learning.

3 | THINKING CREATIVELY: COMMUNITY CONTEXTS FOR TEACHING AND FOR LEARNING

Teachers must think creatively to identify contexts that offer children pathways into culturally responsive learning opportunities. In fact, it is the very "shaking up" of the notion of context that is the foundation of our design work. Typically, traditional curriculum design work begins from some form of external requirement—a set of standards, grade-level expectations, or assessment data. We do take these elements into account, but designing culturally responsive instruction for multilingual learners requires that educators also look to the community to situate, make relevant, and enliven curriculum design. Educators must get out of the school context and into the community. But getting out of the school context can be challenging. If unsupported, TCs' initial forays into community contexts can result in activity and thinking that only reinforces deficit perspectives regarding their students. For this reason, we are deliberate in our efforts to design a scaffolded set of course experiences that enable TCs' culturally responsive teaching. In the next three subsections we detail the three stages of our teacher education model, each corresponding with one of our research questions.

3.1 | Stage 1: Supporting culturally responsive teaching practice in the abstract

In the first stage of our model, we focus on the question "What interactions with families and the community will support TCs' learning?" We support TCs' initial entry into this question through a university course, *Education in a Multilingual Society*, taught by Khasnabis. The course exposes the history of colonialism and linguicism in English teaching (Spring, 2016) and the need for ESL teachers to work assiduously against discriminatory practices in schools. With this foundation as a backdrop, TCs learn to identify and build upon the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of diverse multilingual communities of color. An underlying premise is that learning to recognize and build upon the resources of a community necessitates interactions with community members. As a fish is unaware of the water in which it swims, educators, too, can be unaware of the school walls within which they work. A lack of awareness of those walls and the limitations they put on the work of teaching, makes the space outside of the walls—the community—even less visible for the work of teaching.

To offer a framework for envisioning these boundaries, and the space outside of them, Khasnabis collaborated with a colleague, Carla O'Connor, to construct a design grid for school–community interactions (Khasnabis & O'Connor, 2014) shown in Figure 1. The design grid is a heuristic that illuminates the existence of the school walls and their potential "permeability," allowing for the movement of teachers and community members across these boundaries. It is presented to TCs as a tool for making them aware of the barriers educators typically put on themselves, and for thinking creatively about the notion of "getting out of the school context" as a learner about the community.

The main qualities of the grid are its two axes. The horizontal axis indicates boundary crossing, and the vertical axis indicates directionality of learning. The boundary crossing aspect, or *x*-axis, of the grid is an indicator of the permeability of the school wall, where the center of the horizontal line indicates traditional types of boundary crossing, such as a parent–teacher conferences that parents attend at isolated moments during the school year. As teachers or community members design interactions that require movement past the school walls (e.g., a home visit), the level of permeability increases and the activity is located to the right side of the center. In contrast, activities that
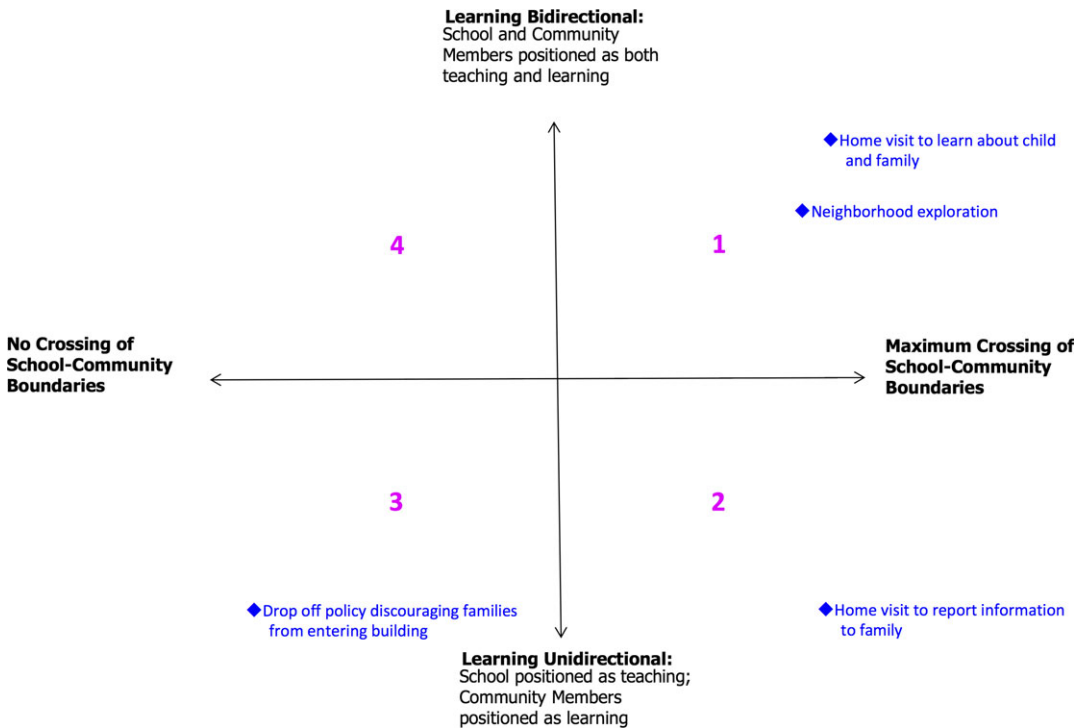
FIGURE 1 Design grid for school–community interactions (Khasnabis & O'Connor, 2014)

discourage teachers from crossing into the community or families from crossing into the school (e.g., a rigid drop-off policy where families are required to drop their children off at the door and not enter the school), are located to the left of the center, due to the limited permeability of the school walls. The fact that this axis exists, and that it is a line that extends in both directions, reveals the possibilities that boundary crossing can occur in a range of ways.

The directionality dimension, or *y*-axis, of the grid is an indicator of the teacher's orientation to teaching and learning, with the center of the line indicating traditional levels of directionality. When teachers design activities that position themselves only as teachers to students and the community, the level of directionality is low and the activity is located below the line's center; whereas if teachers design activities that position themselves as both learners and teachers of students and the community, directionality of learning is high, and the activity is thus located above the line's center.

The tool's full utility, however, is in the interplay of the two axes. In Stage 1 of her course, Khasnabis represents the design grid's four quadrants, with Quadrant 1 indicating activities that are high in boundary crossing and in directionality and Quadrant 3 indicating traditional activities where boundary crossing does not occur and where teachers are teaching only, not learning. The instructor then presents various descriptions and asks the TCs to "plot" those activities where they believe they are best located on the design grid. A home visit, for example, necessarily moves to the right on the boundary-crossing (or horizontal) axis. But the texture of the home visit matters very much for its ultimate placement in either Quadrant 1 or 2. A home visit where a teacher visits a parent to report that their child is at risk of suspension due to his excessive absences would be located in Quadrant 2. A home visit where a teacher visits a parent to learn about the child's

family, life experiences, and the family's hopes and dreams for their child would be located in Quadrant 1.

In the end, a precise placement of an activity on the design grid is not the instructor's goal. Rather, use of the design grid promotes thoughtful deliberation among TCs. The TCs begin to see that family and community engagement efforts designed for Quadrant 1 are where the real richness resides for culturally responsive teaching. The design grid, though complex to initially take in, is an especially useful heuristic as TCs begin to envision possibilities for their interactions with families and communities, perceive the confines of the school walls, and push themselves to think "outside the box."

3.2 | Stage 2: Enacting practice that pushes past the confines of the school walls

Having spent time thinking in the abstract about the kinds of interactions that will allow teachers to learn about and from families and communities, the second stage of our teacher education model gradually engages TCs in a varied set of community-based interactions. It is in this second stage that we take up our second research question, "How can we support TCs' interactions in the community?" We draw on the learning experiences of two TCs, Nikki and Erin,[1] to illustrate this stage of the process. Erin was of European and Native American ancestry and had family members of Mexican heritage. She was fluent in French. Nikki, a white woman, had learned Spanish academically, developed a linguistically diverse social circle, and worked abroad in South America. Both Nikki and Erin brought lenses of cultural inclusion to their work as teachers, as evidenced by comments they made to the authors.

Through their coursework, Nikki and Erin learned to engage in a set of three community-focused activities: conducting a neighborhood exploration, interacting with students and their families at a SESLA orientation meeting, and conducting a home visit with the family of a SESLA student. These experiences all occurred in the spring preceding SESLA, and ultimately contributed to the TCs' design of culturally responsive curriculum for the summer program. In addition, these three learning experiences built upon the TCs' initial use of the design grid as a heuristic. The instructor called attention to the ways that these activities could be located toward the right end of the horizontal axis because they all required the TCs or families to cross boundaries between the school and surrounding community. TCs were taught to engage in each activity with a bidirectional orientation, and used protocols they were provided with that supported this.

When TCs began conducting the community explorations, the authors, in partnership with SESLA teachers, had already begun mapping out a curriculum that proposed local stores as contexts for SESLA learning activities. Through the neighborhood explorations, the TCs led the way in making contact with many of the storeowners. Thus, Nikki and Erin met storeowners in the business strip mall located near the school. Erin visited a number of stores and reported on meaningful conversations during those visits. Erin had also already learned about a Mexican restaurant in the strip mall and knew the story of the owner, Cesar, and how he had moved to the United States From Mexico and then transitioned from becoming a waiter to a restaurant owner over time. Erin met Russian and Bangladeshi grocery storeowners who were each able to share information about the different ethnic groups that were represented in the neighborhood, as well as a great deal about the kinds of produce that different groups preferred. Through these conversations, Erin and Nikki each became aware of the knowledge bases of the various storeowners and grew their

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[1]Please note that student and parent names used in this article are pseudonyms.

understandings of the community surrounding the school. Ultimately, their new relationships with storeowners also became resources for the culturally responsive community-based unit that we describe later.

Next, TCs attended a parent orientation meeting a month prior to the summer program. Through structured small group interactions, they learned about the students' interests and parents' goals for their children. For example, Erin met one of her students, Silvio, and his father, whose home she would later be visiting. She noted that Silvio was very quiet and that he gave no response to her questions about his aspirations. Yet, she sensed a closeness between Silvio and his father, and noted in her class reflection, "There seems to be a strong relationship with his father. I could find out what the father does and start there with talking to Silvio about what he would like to do as an adult."

Erin and Nikki's third experience preceding the summer program was a home visit that they conducted together to Silvio's home. As Nikki was Spanish-proficient, she accompanied Erin in the role of a translator and colleague. In a post-visit reflection, Nikki reflected on the conversation with Silvio's mother, Olinda, who had confided that she was concerned about her son's academic development:

> Olinda was very candid about her son. She said that the reason they brought him from Mexico last month was that he was not doing well in school and was not happy there. ... Olinda is really invested in her son's education. She brought him all the way to Michigan so that he could go to a better school. ... She even has her sixth-grade niece help her know how to help Silvio with his homework. (She does it that way because she said she wants to be the one helping him.)

Nikki's reflection displays her resistance to the deficit assumptions educators have often made regarding Latino parents (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2011; Khasnabis & Goldin, 2016; Pollack, 2012). Instead, Nikki pointed directly to the extra efforts Olinda made to support her son. After learning during the home visit that Silvio enjoyed technology, Erin proposed ways she could support both him and his family:

> As a teacher, I am thinking about how it sounds like Silvio and his family have had some negative experiences with his schooling. I would like to try to boost their confidence a bit and report on things he is doing well and to connect our learning with technology in the classroom. I think that doing these kinds of things will benefit Silvio's learning

Thus, in crossing boundaries into Silvio's home and positioning themselves as learners about families, Erin and Nikki were ultimately inspired to think creatively about the instruction that Silvio could benefit from.

In each successive activity of Stage 2 of our model, course-based activities supported Erin and Nikki to have robust interactions in the community, to learn more about the community and family-based experiences that existed in their school community, and to become aware of a range of ways that they could position themselves as learners of the community while attending to the permeability of the school walls. By growing these understandings, Erin and Nikki came to see new things that are typically not immediately visible to teachers and ultimately to think outside of the box of the school walls as they created a unit of instruction for the summer program.

3.3 | Stage 3: Putting it all together in a community-focused unit of instruction

In the final stage of our model, we attend to our third research question, "How can connections with community members ultimately contribute to culturally responsive community-focused summer school curriculum?" Nikki and Erin and the other TCs in their course drew on their learning from Stages 1 and 2 of our model, as they participated in the design and enactment of a 3-week culturally responsive unit of instruction titled *Making a Living—Making a Life*. The unit's core focus was to learn how community members, including many immigrants, were "making a living" in many different ways, and therein "making a life" story. Once the TCs had begun to build relationships with storeowners during the community exploration, they were supported by the authors and experienced teachers to create a sequence of lessons that would engage their students in learning about these community members. We describe here some of the meaningful interactions that occurred during the enactment of the community-based curriculum.

Led by the TCs, children interviewed adults, read broadly, and viewed videos about immigrants who had pursued a range of professional, business, and service-focused careers. A core activity of the unit engaged students in regularly walking six blocks down from the school to local immigrant-owned businesses, such as Cesar's restaurant, Tmaz Taquería, and attached convenience store Portales de Tmaz. In addition to Tmaz and Portales, the students walked to beauty parlors, multicultural grocery stores, an auto shop, and retail businesses to investigate how immigrant business owners were making their livings and composing their lives. They were also visited at the school by many community members, including among others a police officer, an engineer, an immigration lawyer, an immigration rights activist, and a video game designer. Students developed academic language skills by learning to ask open-ended questions about the lives, skills, and insights of these community members. They applied their learning from these conversations to the construction of persuasive promotional brochures that they designed for the businesses in their neighborhood. Teachers and TCs provided instruction about the specific features and linguistic forms inherent in persuasive, informational, and biographical writing, which students then incorporated into the brochures (see Figure 2).

We zero in on the experiences of Cesar, the taquería owner, and his experiences with the students, including Silvio, to illustrate the power of the community-based context in culturally responsive teaching. When asked about his interest in participating in the unit, Cesar referred to his prior career as a teacher in Mexico: "It's great especially for me being from Mexico and teaching there for a long time. Came here and to have the families in this place and embrace the community. I think it's wonderful! So the kids are always welcome." We repeatedly heard from multiple business owners that, like Cesar, they felt a strong connection to the students, a desire to contribute to their learning, and often offered them advice and mentorship, as the children, too, were "making their lives" in a new country.

Early in the program Erin and her sixth-grade students, including Silvio, walked the six blocks down to Tmaz Taquería. The restaurant offered well-loved traditional Mexican foods such as tacos, as well as the favorite baked good, conchas. When they arrived, Cesar gave the students a tour of the restaurant, offered them Mexican sodas, Jarritos, and answered their questions. During this trip, Cesar met Silvio and learned that Silvio had just recently arrived from Mexico. He talked with Silvio individually and at greater length in Spanish. They compared birthplaces, and struck up an easy conversation—notable because Silvio was typically very quiet in the school setting.

FIGURE 2 A partial student-created brochure for Portales de Tmaz

On the second trip, Silvio's group returned with a set of follow-up questions that they had written with the support of their teachers. When Silvio's turn arrived, he asked in well-rehearsed English: "Do you deliver?" A wide smile spread across Cesar's face, and he responded, "I see you're improving in English! That's great! *Estás mejorando el inglés!*" Cesar then continued to answer Silvio's question in Spanish, a departure from his other responses, as he crafted his response directly for Silvio. Silvio seemed to positively experience Cesar's encouragement of his developing English. Cesar was a member of Silvio's community, an adult who had experienced similar challenges of distance from his native country but who had ultimately constructed a living and a life in a new home.

As the conversation with the students continued, Cesar shared meaningful cultural knowledge with the students. When asked if he ever rented out the venue for parties, Cesar went on a tangent and said, "Have you ever heard about posadas?" (The students chorally responded with an enthusiastic "YES!"). He continued, "I want to do a posada. I'm thinking we'd like to have a multicultural event. I think it will be something great. We can close the street!" Cesar also spoke about his relationship with his family, explaining that many of the restaurant's recipes were based on "little tricks and tips that I learned from my mom" and that his mother's favorite guacamole was on the menu. He also gave a historical lesson about the restaurant, explaining that its name and design were inspired by his beloved hometown in Mexico, Tmascalcingo, that was home to a popular market and whose architecture was influenced by Aztec culture. He explained that he wanted his restaurant to feel like home for his customers—for them to "find a little Mexico inside the United States." The connection Cesar had with his home country and that he wanted to share with his customers—and with these students—was palpable. We felt this connection, and the students did too.

4 | BRINGING IT ALL HOME

Community connections are critical for culturally responsive teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teacher educators must make greater efforts to ensure that TCs are familiar with the importance of these connections, and the positive impact these connections can have on academic achievement (Quezada, 2014; Quezada, Alexandrowicz, & Molina, 2013). In addition to these positive impacts, scholars have noted the dangers of deficit narratives (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2016; Pollack, 2012) that are of particular risk to beginning teachers. Community connections can help to disrupt these perspectives, as the work of Warren, Noftle, Ganley, & Quintanar (2011) evidences.

Supported by their teacher education program, Nikki, Erin, and their peers in our teacher education program learned to think creatively, move outside the confines of the school walls to learn about the knowledge and resources of their students and their community, and to enact culturally responsive teaching. By participating in the three-stage process, TCs learned to interact with community members by considering the notions of boundary crossing and directionality of learning, first in the abstract (Stage 1), then in practice with the support of their course-based activities (Stage 2), and finally by translating their learning into the design and enactment of a culturally responsive community-focused curriculum (Stage 3).

Ultimately, students themselves conveyed their own creativity in multi-genre brochures about businesses, such as Tmaz (see Figure 3), that Cesar displayed at the register and distributed to customers. In it, students offered information, highlighting the restaurant's products and services; they wrote persuasively, convincing readers that there were a myriad of reasons to eat at this restaurant; and they created autobiographical and biographical narratives, telling a bit about themselves in an "about the authors" section and providing substantive information about Cesar. These brochures evidence the guiding principles of our curriculum design work for ELs (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Khasnabis et al., 2016; Reischl & Khasnabis, 2016): they illuminate connections to the community, they include multiple writing genres and an authentic purpose in their community, they create a space for academic learning, and they draw upon the use of multiple modes of learning, including visuals and various technologies.

Creating such programs in an ongoing and substantive way requires a unique kind of creativity —creativity that invites participants into new spaces. For our EL students, we saw creativity in the persuasive brochures they designed for authentic use in their communities, creations that were based on their own ideas about what is valuable about the businesses in their communities. We saw our TCs' creativity in the efforts they made to cross boundaries into the communities and homes of their students and to learn in and from these spaces where teachers traditionally do not go. And, as teacher educators, we were rejuvenated by the creative process of envisioning learning opportunities for ELs, TCs, and ourselves that got us out of context, pushed past the confines of the school walls, and opened up what were otherwise unimaginable possibilities.

5 | THE AUTHORS

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Tmaz Taqueria

Tmaz is a really good Mexican restaurant with soothing music. They have fresh, authentic Mexican food. They have double tortillas on the tacos. Also, they have tasty and delicious quesadillas on the menu. Tmaz has lots of flavors of Jarritos like pineapple, strawberry, and lime. In Tmaz, they also have a bakery. In the bakery, they have conchas and lots of other sweet breads. Tmaz is near Packard Road and Platt Road.

Menu Items

Tacos -- $1.80
Quesadillas -- $3.00
Tortitas de Espinaca -- $9.00
Tortas -- $6.50-$7.50
Churrascos -- $6.00
Jarritos --1.75-2.00

Why should you choose Tmaz?

- Food is very fresh
- Kind, knowledgeable employees
- Vegetarian options and healthy ingredients
- Food is low priced
- Owner supports the community

Meet Cesar

Cesar used to live in Veracruz, Mexico. After he moved to the U.S.A. in 1998, he worked for 10 years and then started Tmaz. When his sons were old enough, they helped their dad a lot at Tmaz. Then, Cesar saved money from Tmaz and bought Goodies. He is going to change the name of Goodies to Portales de Tmaz. Cesar recommended his favorite foods at Tmaz: caldo, tacos, and popusa.

FIGURE 3 A partial student-created brochure for Tmaz Taquería

between the university and Ann Arbor Public Schools. She teaches and does research in the areas of language, literacy and culture.

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