‘Why Do They Talk about Spirits?’
Anthropological Interventions in Classroom Settings with Latin@ Immigrant Students

Alicia Re Cruz

ABSTRACT: This article describes the author’s experiences as a professor in a Bilingual Education Programme at a local university; students are public school teachers in North Texas, teaching in classrooms ranging from 80 to 95 per cent Latin@ students. The author uses multi-sited ethnography and history in order to set the scenario for the political, ideological and economic factors embedded in the understanding of the Latin@ immigrant community presence in the area. The article documents anthropological ‘intervention’ strategies through papers and research projects. Students (public school teachers) are required to exercise participatory approaches to engage their own Latin@ students in their research papers. Through analysis of the transformative research projects presented by the students, the author documents the power of anthropological intervention and the effects in education policy.

KEYWORDS: Anthropology and Education, anthropology in the classroom, Bilingual Education, immigrant students, Latin@ students, participatory methodology teachers’ training

Introduction

During the last two decades, global migrations drastically changed the demographics of many countries. These movements produce significant political and cultural changes in social institutions; in particular, they provoke and demand significant changes in education programmes, policies and curricula to meet the needs of increasingly diverse educational settings. This impacts on our understanding of the roles that the education system has in pursuing social equity and the formation of productive citizens. Consequently, there is an urgent challenge to train teachers to be aware of their students’ cultural diversity in order to increase their pedagogical effectiveness. This kind of awareness is particularly necessary in societies where teachers have a different ethno-racial and linguistic background from those of their students. Teacher preparation programmes need to address how to be effective in facing ethno-racial and linguistic differences; how to address structural inequalities in society based on class and immigrant status; and the educational policies and practices that perpetuate unequal educational experiences.

In the last two decades, the North Texas region witnessed a dramatic increase of Latin@ immigrants, which affected the demographic composition of public schools in the area. This article describes the experiences of the author in training a group of teachers within their MA programme in Bilingual Education. I am a bilingual and bicultural applied anthropologist who was asked to teach a course, ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’, in Spanish within the MA programme in Bilingual Education due to my expertise with peasant and migrant Mayas in the Yucatan peninsula and Latin@ immigrants in Texas.

I taught this course from 2001 to 2007, once every three or four semesters. The course aimed at providing public school teachers, my students, with the historic and ethnographic background of the countries from which their Latin@ immigrant students descended. It was my goal to complement the teaching
of Mesoamerica socio-cultural and historical processes with the anthropological tools that would enhance my students’ critical understanding of their own students. This case study documents the effectiveness of teaching anthropological concepts, theories and methods while teaching the history and ethnography of Mesoamerica and it also demonstrates how training teachers in basic anthropological concepts helps to bring up their awareness on the challenges that Latin@ students face in their classrooms.

From Praxis to Theory and Back

This ethnographic account builds upon the critical pedagogy tradition founded by Paulo Freire (1970), deeply rooted in the relationship of cross-fertilization between the researcher and people studied, as the core of knowledge production. The article focuses on the public school ESL (English as a Second Language) and Bilingual Education teachers who took the Mesoamerican Ethnology course I taught; these public school teachers worked in Texas schools, and most of them were born in the U.S. The students they taught ranged from kindergarten to high school age with a Latin@ student body representing above 80 per cent of the total student body. The course material, ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’, was used to bring awareness among my students on the inaccurate assumptions about their Latin@ students of which they were unaware. The ethnographic observations in the classroom also contributed to the emergence of these crucial elements of educational praxis. By ‘praxis’ I mean not only the practice of anthropological concepts and methods but also the ethico-political dimension that it embraces when it brings up teachers’ awareness in revealing contradictions and inequalities among their students in the classroom. Spindler and Spindler’s concept of cultural therapy has been very influential in the way this article is framed. For Spindler and Spindler (1994), cultural therapy is a process through which teachers’ examination of their own culture brings awareness of their biases not only in their social interactions with students, but also in the way they understand the transmission and the process of learning. This type of ethnography tied to pedagogical and educational praxis is a vehicle for action and intervention since it reveals the socio-cultural and ethno-historical contexts that make it possible to understand social marginality and inequities. It is also my purpose to demonstrate that it is not enough to reveal the social and cultural challenges in the educational process, particularly related to Latin@ education, but also how these become the basis for a radical and transformational pedagogy that can inform policies aiming at the attainment of social equality and justice.

Here I present the intricacies of the cross-fertilizing production of knowledge between my students and me, which greatly influenced the flow of the course content’s presentation and discussions. I also address the use of the anthropological tools inspired by the dialectical professor/student relationship in the production of knowledge. It is my goal to introduce the reader to anthropological praxis as it unfolds throughout the course and infer ways in which that praxis informs theoretical formulations, which get re-nourished through the dialectical nature of the praxis.

My first question was, ‘how can I make the historic and cultural processes developed in Mesoamerica relevant to my students whose life trajectories and social realities are contextualized in North Texas?’ My goal was to present the ethnographic and historic data from Mesoamerica so my students could establish connections with the majority of their students who come from the countries that comprise the macro cultural area of Mesoamerica, mainly from Mexico. It was also my goal to avoid cultural ‘essentialism’ when talking about Mesoamerican culture and Latin@ immigrant culture. Although critical to this work, it was not until later I realized the enormity of these issues.

On the first day of class I was ready to distribute the syllabus of the course with a straightforward structure: Pre-Hispanic, Colonial and Contemporary Mesoamerica. After introducing myself, I asked the group of thirty-five students to introduce themselves. Except for a small group of diverse cultural background (Mexican-American, Mexican, Colombian, Salvadorian and Spanish), most of these ESL and Bilingual education teachers were from the U.S. I was curious to know how my students perceived their own Latin@ students; I asked them if, according to their experience in the classroom, they could identify certain characteristics about their Latin@ students. Some referred to the student’s lack of academic preparation and knowledge; others addressed the number of absences due to major family events like *quinceañeras*, weddings, town patron celebrations, and so on. Those who were teachers in high schools brought up the issue of ‘at risk students’ and dropouts. When I asked how they acknowledged the cultural diversity of their classrooms, my students referred to the work and energy involved in the annual organization of festivals.
There was much discussion involving preparation of traditional Mexican folkloric dances, music and food to celebrate the culture of their Latin@ students. Other teachers pointed out that all their students were eligible for free breakfast and lunch because of the lack of family resources. And finally, one student diverged. He pondered, ‘Why do they talk about spirits?’ in relation to an anecdote concerning one of his students, a first grader and a recent immigrant from Mexico. During recess this child, looking at a bird in a tree, said: ‘Maestro, ve a ese pájaro detrás del árbol? No vaya ahí porque lo van a espantar’ [Teacher, do you see that spirit behind the tree? Do not go there, it will scare you]. The teacher was perplexed and did not know how to answer.

What my students were presenting was a way to characterize their Latin@ students. It reflected cultural assumptions and perceptions that scholars in the area of education have analysed at length. In fact, an extensive body of scholarship on intercultural and multicultural education focuses on the school folkloric celebrations of multiculturalism and the way they end up accentuating social and political inequalities. They portray ‘the other’, in this case the Latin@ culture, as monolithically encapsulated in folkloric representations (Ulichny 1996; Lustig 1997; Nieto 2000; Gorski 2006). Likewise, other of my students’ comments related to the lack of intellectual skills or weakness in academic training, expressing the fundamentals of a perspective known as deficit theory. This perspective has inspired a great deal of scholarly criticism among anthropologists in the area of education (Foley 1990; Olmedo 1997). Some of this criticism vindicates the value of the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al. 1995; Gonzalez et al. 2005), in reference to the body of knowledge historically and culturally developed and accumulated, which is essential for the functioning of the students within their own families. Funds of knowledge, although learned at home, are relevant cultural tools to accommodate in the formal education process. Deficit theory is also linked to the concept of students being ‘at risk’. It is usually applied to any population of youth experiencing behavioural and academic problems in school. Finally, my student’s comment regarding beliefs in spirits ratifies the clear identification of the Latin@ group, a type of ‘other’ closer to the world of superstition than to that of Christianity, the ideological basis of the hegemonic power in the U.S. Although my students associated scarcity of resources with their Latin@ students’ families, there was no indication they had a perspective on how it was related to the existing socio-political order and the marginal role that the Latin@ community plays in it.

**Theoretical Insights**

My students’ comments on the first day of class fuelled my anthropological imagination in three areas. First, how to facilitate their awareness of the need to re-examine their own philosophies, motivations and world views in their work as educators; second, to understand the socio-economic and political inequalities experienced by the Latin@ immigrant community in Texas and how these are reproduced in the school culture; and third, the critical role that teachers can have in stimulating pedagogical shifts needed to promote social equity not only in their classrooms but also to sensitize and prepare students, future active contributors to society, to deal with issues related to social justice. Obviously, my most immediate strategies to pursue these goals emerged from the basic conceptual anthropological tool kit (the definition of culture, holism and cultural relativism).

Throughout the ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’ course, the theoretical framework of Political Economy was very effective in presenting the Latin@ community, particularly immigrants, in conjunction with global structural trends and the local North Texan cultural and ideological contexts; this framework facilitated the understanding of how Latin@ students’ experiences are moulded by education policies that reinforce discrimination and social inequality (see Reyes and Valencia 1993; Oakes and Lipton 2002; Cammarota 2004, 2008). For this, it was crucial to introduce students to the concept of ‘class’, and its connection with education. With this, I would present the hegemonic strategies that are used to promote immobility and further discrimination of the underrepresented, particularly the unqualified Latin@ immigrant group, who are easily manipulated as cheap labour within the societal infrastructure. For instance, Cammarota (2004: 57) documents the assumptions in the media and public policy discourse on urban youth violence and growing public concern for safety and how the consequent increasing state institutional policies, when applied to schools, end up contributing to the labelling of Latin@ youth as criminals.

Although the concept of class is linked to income and occupation, it also refers to a particular practice of living, rooted in both material and the cultural expectations and understanding (Weis and Dolby 2012: 1–2). This is reflected in Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977). The structural effects and the ways
class is played out in the practices of living, or *habitus*, have profound repercussion in the deepening of social inequalities. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have demonstrated how academic standards are filled with cultural resources that strengthen the cultural capital children use in their adaptation and adjustment to school. At the same time, as Bourdieu explains (1977), schools are not neutral spaces but arenas in which class structure is reproduced and legitimized by facilitating the success of those children familiar with the valued capital, those more in agreement with those who are closer to hegemonic power.

When talking about Latin@s in the North Texas region, we need to acknowledge the nature and dynamics of transnational social and cultural processes as *sine qua non* components of Latin@ immigrants as a social class. The concept of transnational migration embeds a multiplicity of aspects that make the migration experience the result of a dialectical cultural relationship between the ‘here’ (host culture) versus ‘there’ (the culture of origin) (Kearney and Nagengast 1989; Rouse 1991). Transnational immigrant cultures and experiences promote a different type of cultural capital that provides children with different resources that affect their educational outcome and reproduce social inequalities. Sometimes, these inequalities are thought or perceived to be connected to intellectual, moral or spiritual deficiencies (Collins 1988), like deficit theory states. This tends to problematize or pathologize those who seem unable to follow the norm. Deficit theory has been used in colonizing contexts to justify imperial interventions to help, to assist or to fix social or political problems. It also fuels stereotypes that circulate throughout the mass media, associated to particular ethnic groups, like Latin@s being linked to machismo, laziness, backwardness and lacking skills to speak English (Villenas 2001).

Thus, it was imperative to introduce my students to the concepts of ‘class’ and ‘race’ and the multiversity of forms in which these interact and get expressed in formal and informal educational policies, particularly related to their Latin@ students and families. This was a fundamental step in the anthropological praxis of the course. The purpose was to raise awareness of the relevant role teachers can play as agents of change in the education system. To attain this goal, it was important to familiarize them with critical race theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1994), as a framework that facilitates understanding of the role of ethnicity and culture in the foundations of knowledge and learning, and how this translates to social and educational inequalities.

The anthropological imagination is very eager to reach for the theoretical tool kit when working on a particular case. In this case, I had to be cautious in finding pedagogical strategies to translate these theoretical approaches into the everyday praxis of my teacher students in their own classrooms. I felt my lectures should be presented in a way that the ethnographic and historical information of Mesoamerica would entice my students’ participation in class. Their questions, comments and narratives would emerge from their real-life experiences in their classrooms.

**The Construction of the Course**

*First Part: Pre-Hispanic Past*

The concept of epistemology, a system of knowledge in relation to the different and distinctive ways the world is apprehended, was very productive in the introduction of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. This was the first opportunity to explain and document the principle of cultural relativism. By applying the concept of epistemology to understanding pre-Hispanic cultures, my students were exposed to the ways cyclical conceptions of time correlate with Mesoamerican cosmovision. Of special interest was the *Popol Vuh*, the creation myth of the Mayas. This is an ancient narrative that lays out the five attempts by the Mayan gods to create the most perfect world; it was the last attempt that culminated with the creation of the ‘corn people’. Corn, considered the human flesh, is the essence of the last and most perfect humankind possible for the Pre-Hispanic Maya. My students were thrilled to be able to make connections between the ancestral myth of creation for Mesoamerican people and the contemporary cultural value that corn, at the centre of the culinary culture, still has in the Latin@ community. The theme that provoked great perplexity was the Maya mathematical system, which was vigesimal and had only three numerical signs, the zero, the dot (equal to 1), and the bar (equal to 5). The calendric knowledge and the way to count time through two distinctive but interrelated calendar counts, the solar and the lunar or ceremonial, was another significant revelation for my teacher students. In reality, it was through the explanation of the calendric system that they began to understand the cyclical essence of Mesoamerican time, which intimately connects the life cycle of the individual with nature (agricultural cycle) and the cosmos (calendar).
The presentation of the pre-Hispanic period was a fruitful strategy to convey the holistic nature of the anthropological analysis. My students were enticed by the exoticism of ancient Mesoamerica. This may be due to the historical distance and the epistemological uniqueness in creating a perception of a very distant ‘other’. Within this unit we explored the understanding of cyclical time. Usually, the discussion turned into what it means for us, in the U.S, and then my students start comparing the lineal conception of time, connected to individual expectations, with cyclical conceptions of time, connected to the individuals as part of larger groups. I try to document these ideas with examples. I ask students to research their classrooms and ask their students a question related to time, such as ‘When do you do homework?’, ‘When do you start watching TV?’ or ‘When to have dinner at home?’ After the exercise in their classrooms, my teacher students return to my class and present their results: instead of providing an absolute time, like ‘at 5:00 pm’ or at ‘8:15 pm’, the Latin@ students are more inclined to provide an answer with a relative time, such as ‘Before my dad comes from work’, or ‘When my little brother wakes up from his nap’. In other words, these are answers that point out a concept of time that ‘connects’ the individual with other cycles related to family or community.

Surprisingly, most of the students have heard the names of some of the ancient classic cities and cultures that we review, but they know very little about Mesoamerican cultures. Social science textbooks used in Texas public schools do not mention nor analyse the mathematical, astronomic and scientific advancements or the philosophical depth of classic Mesoamerican cultures. These topics provoke such astonishment that in many cases, teacher students introduce readings and discussion topics in their own social science curricula ‘so my students can know the grandiose cultural splendour of their past’, as one of my teacher students said.

Second Part: Colonial Period

The three hundred years of colonial history in Mesoamerica have marked important cultural processes that are still relevant in contemporary cultural contexts. Among these, I will mention and elaborate on a few just to document these connections.

Christianity was imposed on the indigenous populations, although in reality the end product was a syncretic phenomenon that translates the native religious corpus into the Catholic dogma and vice versa. It resulted in a religious system marked by the qualities of pre-Hispanic sacred entities and the Catholic sacred elements. La Virgen de Guadalupe was born in this way; she appeared to an Indian, Juan Diego, a few years after the conquest of Mexico. However, the Virgin has pre-Hispanic attributes; she is brown, depicted within the sun rays, surrounded by stars, standing on the top of the moon. Furthermore, her image is framed by an oval shape, which resembles the maíz or corn kernel. The syncretic origin of the Virgen de Guadalupe as the ideological legitimation of the colonization of Mexico is very important. In this way, my students might understand past and present use of this sacred image in family altars, churches, body tattoos, necklaces or painted on vehicles.

Patriarchal ideology was also introduced as a crucial ideological fundamental in the Spanish colonial enterprise. The understanding of some cultural processes coupled with the patriarchal ideology provided the grounds for my students’ comments and observations related to the distinctive treatment their Latin@ boys have in relation to girls. Some of my students expressed, with deep sadness, how some of her Latin@ female students come to class without their homework. Most immigrant mothers have to work and when girls return home from school, they have to take care of their siblings and perform the domestic role of their mothers.

The colonial ‘caste’ system, with skin colour as the criterion for social rankings, was highly controversial when presented in the course. The caste system placed ‘coloured’ people, descendants of Indian and African slaves, at the bottom of the social order, mestizos were in the middle, then criollos and finally, peninsulares at the top. Society was hierarchically racialized. Spanish colonial institutions, like encomienda (the right of colonist to have direct access to land and Indian labour), and repartimiento (Indian labour draft), promoted the impossibility of the Indian population to advance in social status. So, these institutions helped colonists to have direct and easy access to cheap Indian labour. This colonial historical sketch instigated reflections in which my students could identify skin colour as a criterion for social adscription and for unequal access to political and economic resources in the U.S.

A theme that impressed my students was the indigenous messianic and nativistic resistance movements against the colonial power. In particular, my students were moved by indigenous recreations of pre-Hispanic cultural symbols as ideological weapons.
to react against the colonial economic and political exploitation. These resistance movements manifested the power of the community as a collective force.

Third Part: Modern and Contemporary Mesoamerica

The last part of the course focused on the cultural processes that emerge from the Independence movement. Particular attention was placed on political and economic interventionism of the U.S. in Central America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The dominant U.S. capitalism of the early twentieth century in Mexico and Central America brought dramatic economic growth to the region. It failed, however, to promote the wellbeing of common people. Peasants were drawn into wage labour (much of it required as debt cancellations). Industrial workers, most of them of rural origins, occupied the manufacturing jobs of the burgeoning cities and were subjected to severe economic exploitation and racial discrimination. Powerful U.S. influences were developing conditions that would lead to revolutionary social reactions. The 1910 Mexican Revolution was the first time in Mexican history that indigenous people were represented in social movements and had an indigenous revolutionary leader, Emiliano Zapata.

My students were also exposed to the deep structural transformations occurring in conjunction with late-twentieth-century neoliberal reforms. Transformations included free trade, encouragement of foreign investment and reduction of public spending. The tourism industry that the Mexican government relies on to increase revenues pulled great numbers of indigenous people from their rural communities to become the cheap proletariat of the international tourist emporium. Cancun is a prime example (Re Cruz 1996a, 1996b). These economic developments coincided with the revisions of article 27 in the Mexican constitution, allowing the privatization of ejidos (communal agricultural land). This also eased the path for NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), and with NAFTA the pauperization of rural communities due to the high cost of fertilizers, lack of financial support, and migration to the urban centres and to the U.S.

The conclusion of the course was focused on the phenomenon of transnationalism and the anthropological analysis of immigrants’ experiences. This portion of the course addressed immigrant reproduction of communities across the border, in the host society and the social inequalities that keep the base of lower social classes, racialized by skin colour, with little possibility of upward mobility. To document these processes, we briefly discussed the Dallas-Fort Worth region. The greater Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area is currently the fifth largest urban region in the nation. It has a population of 4 million and is the second fastest growing metropolitan area in the nation (Weinstein and Clover 2007). Besides being the largest and most diversified economy in the country, the Dallas Metroplex region is home to thousands of migrants and refugees. The area also represents the fourth highest rate of job growth among the nation’s metropolitan areas since 1990. The increasing availability of immigrants, both legal and undocumented, becomes the infrastructural force for the rapid economic development of the cities around the Metroplex.

Some of my teacher students were able to establish historical parallels between the racialized, caste-like social order under Spanish colonial rule and the racialized social order of Latin@ immigrants. Understanding the value of community in colonial resistance movements facilitated my students’ comprehension of the contemporary significance of the cultural strategies Latin@ immigrants develop to create their own transnational communities in North Texas. For instance, Latin@ immigrants activate contacts among compadres, friends and relatives to build networks of assistance, through which information, capital, goods and services circulate (Re Cruz 2005). Class discussions on the social and cultural value of community promoted my students’ reflections on their own experiences and observations in their own classrooms with their own students. For example, they pointed out how these patterns of community building can be easily observed in school, at the cafeteria, when the group of Latin@ students sits together, in their own communities, independent from the Anglo students and faculty.

The Method for the ‘Shift’: Participatory Action Research

The presentation of historic and ethnographic processes in Mesoamerica, as I describe above, provided conceptual space to introduce my students to the idea that knowledge is ‘constructed’, that it constitutes a process that encapsulates implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives and biases (Berger and Luckman 1966). In addition, ‘the paradigm’ as a concept (Kuhn 1962) helped my students to understand how knowledge is created and how it
is influenced by the racial, ethnic and social-class positions of individuals and groups. For instance, students showed great surprise when exposed to the ample legacy of historical heroes (Moctezuma, Tecum Uma, Quetzalcotal, Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Comandante Marcos, just to cite a few) and sophisticated indigenous literature, arts and political activism among contemporary indigenous ethnic groups.

In sum, from the past to the present of Mesoamerica, my students acknowledged that their understanding of the southern U.S. neighbours was minimal and interpreted through the Western positivist paradigm in that knowledge is objective, neutral and with universal principles. Thus, my students started to point out the need for a paradigm shift in the ways to interact with their Latin@ students. How to initiate this ‘shift’?

The last part of the course is focused on the introduction of basic ethnographic methods, like participant observation, interviews, surveys and life stories. My students were asked to choose a research topic and utilize anthropological methods to obtain the information. I asked them to create strategies to engage their Latin@ students and families in their research process. This participatory research methodology paves the way for a much richer and more productive communication between teachers and Latin@ students’ families. Some of the research topics chosen were: healing rituals, the values and rituals associated with corn; the concept of ‘home’ (comparing home in the original countries and home in Texas); why Latin@s do not like Boy Scouts; story telling; border crossing; the conceptualizations of God, and so on.

With this, the course on ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’ became a way to identify their Latin@ students’ and families’ needs, using anthropological methods. Teachers became observers of their own realities in their own classrooms. The design of these participatory research projects, however, faced an imminent challenge: how to develop these projects during class time? How to integrate these projects within the school curricula? How and when to ask the students for their stories crossing the border, information about healing herbs and rituals, or drawings showing characters of traditional stories?

Accountability has become the new reality in public schools across the country and the result has been ‘testing factories’ (McNeil 2000; Wood 2004; Venezuela 2005). We live in an era in which the ‘culture of measurement’ is dominating the ‘culture of engagement’ (Padilla 2005). The participatory nature of the course research projects certainly magnified the teachers’ challenges in meeting the demands of the accountability school culture. Market-driven discourses and policies bring globalization to schools. High-stakes testing and rigid curricula based on competency-based skills, instead of critical thinking, are neoliberal policy strategies of global markets interventions in schools as much as in cities and nations (Lipman 2004: 8). This accountability policy framework is generally presented as an effort to maintain equity and social justice, defining it strictly through standardized test scores. This ‘neutral’ nature of standardized test scores persuades this type of testing to be perceived as simple truth. It hides, however, its intrinsic mechanism to de-qualify poor students and students of colour. Indeed, the tangible outcomes of accountability policies grossly disregard the challenges of equity and race, class and gender. It promotes an ideological hegemonic frame and, consequently, assumes that accountability through testing and assessments promotes the nation’s prosperity and serves the needs of the under-represented (Marshall and McCarthy 2002). Therefore, my students, transformed as researchers, had to identify very creative strategies to seek permission by their school principals to undertake their research projects in the classrooms. In order to document this process, I present here a few cases. One of my students was a maths teacher in second grade. She was impressed by the explanation of paradigms and how the construction of systems of knowledge affects our perceptions and understanding. She was also intrigued by transnationalism and socio-economic marginalization, particularly of undocumented immigrants. She came up with the idea of inviting the father of one of her students, who was a construction worker, to talk about the way he uses mathematics in his daily construction projects. When the project was presented to the school principal, she faced the principal’s immediate rejection of the project because it did not fit the mathematics curriculum. My student had the brilliant idea to present her guest as a device to introduce students to the different measurement systems, a lesson within the mathematics curriculum. The construction worker gave a lesson on how to measure according to the metric system, which is used in Mexico. The presentation was peppered with numerous questions and comments from the students. This was one of the first times that the teacher experienced active students’ engagements in her classroom. Students were familiar with the terms used by the presenter in Spanish, which not only validated their knowledge and
culture, but also validated the legitimacy of a profession that was not considered skilled. Furthermore, although the occupation is structurally associated with the underrepresented, in was presented as having authority in the teaching and learning context.

Another of my students was very interested in ‘funds of knowledge’ (Velez-Ibañez and Greenberg 1992; Gonzalez et al. 1995) as a strategy to build constructive relations among students, families and teachers. This approach builds upon knowledge and social relationships that engage children at home. It promotes the use of this knowledge as asset and resource in the classroom. My student identified a few families and, with their permission, visited their homes. Through these visits, my student could become familiar with the life stories of parents, mainly mothers, their challenges, and the ways they learn to negotiate their social and economic environment. It was through these visits that the teacher learned of the mothers’ daily struggles dealing with bureaucratic systems: in their children’s schools, in the hospital seeking health care, at the store, with their landlords, in a language that they do not speak or in which they know just a few expressions. These home visits provided the teacher with a much better understanding of her students’ families’ lives. She became familiar with her students’ funds of knowledge, nurtured at home, which she could utilize in the creation of more efficient pedagogies in the classroom. A few of these mothers volunteered for different school activities and events related to their children’s classrooms. Several became the leaders of La Escuelita, an after-school programme just for parents in which they could voice their concerns, request information or clarification about school systems and programmes.

**Is it Multicultural, Intercultural or Transformative Education?**

While I was teaching ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’ the term ‘multicultural education’ surfaced. My students used it in reference to the theoretical approach to navigate cultural diversity in their classrooms. A major goal of multicultural education is to pursue education reforms so that students from diverse racial, ethnic and social class groups can experience educational equality (Banks 1989; Nieto 1992). There are different types of multiculturalism that educators can translate into critical pedagogies and move to action as a way to challenge existing power relationships and pursue social justice (Sleeter 1996). Gay (1992) also points out that among the diversity of approaches in multiculturalism there is an immense gap between theory and practice. There is a general agreement among most scholars that, for multicultural education to be implemented successfully, institutional changes must be made, including changes in the curriculum, teaching materials, teaching styles, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of teachers and administrators. Both schools and university practitioners however have a limited concept of multiculturalism and attempt to implement it by making changes in the curriculum to include content related to other ethnic and cultural groups and women (Banks 1993; Osuna 2013 in this issue). In fact, the implementation of multicultural programmes can exacerbate the conflict between different ethnic groups in schools if the implementation is partial and superficial rather than systematic. Lustig proposes to go back to the post-Second World War term ‘intercultural’ education, which was part of the assimilationist rhetoric and reflects the idealistic vision that everyone get along together. Lustig addresses the need to reclaim ‘intercultural’ as a way to pay attention to the process of the relationships among different ethnic groups. Disregarding the use of the term, either multicultural or intercultural, what is crucial, as Lustig evidences, is the implementation of intercultural education according to the patterns of interethnic relations at each school and the willingness to investigate those patterns with students, from their perspectives (1997: 588).

In Spain, in 2005 I became member of an interdisciplinary group of scholars working on immigration, the impact of cultural diversity in the schools and the educational policies that promote racism or social integration. It was through the discussion with my Spanish colleagues that I was introduced to the concept of intercultural education. In 1983 at a conference in Dublin, the European ministers for education unanimously passed a resolution on the schooling of migrant children, in which the importance of the ‘intercultural dimension’ of education was highlighted. Since the mid-1980s the Council of Europe has promoted numerous projects for education. Education is no longer seen as multi- or trans-cultural, but instead as ‘intercultural’. This is defined by the Council of Europe as entailing ‘reciprocity’ (see Rey 1986). This reciprocity has a political and educational dimension focused on relations of co-operation and solidarity rather than relations of domination, conflict, rejection and exclusion (Portera 2008). The emphasis is on the
relational and tolerance dimensions of multicultural educational settings and their linkage to democracy, peace and citizenship. For Aguado, intercultural education is:

una práctica, una forma de pensar y hacer que entiende la educación como transmisión y construcción cultural; que promueve prácticas educativas dirigidas a todos y cada uno de los miembros de la sociedad en su conjunto; que propone un modelo de análisis y de actuación que afecte a todas las dimensiones del proceso educativo. Los objetivos de esta educación son la igualdad de oportunidades –entendida como oportunidades de elección y de acceso a recursos sociales, económicos y educativos–, la superación del racismo y la adquisición de competencia intercultural [a práctica, a way of thinking and doing that understands education as a cultural transmission and construction; it also promotes education practices aiming at each and every member of society; it proposes a model of analysis and action that affects all dimensions of the education process. This type of educational objective is equal opportunity – understood as the opportunity to choose and to have access to social, economic and educational resources – to overcome racism and the acquisition of intercultural competencies.]

Although framed in an intercultural education paradigm, the above definition and stated goals could have been perfectly applied to the ways multicultural education has been conceptualized and defined, among many others (Suzuki 1984; Parekh 1986; Sleeter and Grant 1987; Bennett 1990; Nieto 1992), by Banks, for whom ‘A major goal of multicultural education, as stated by specialists in the field, is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality’ (1993: 3).

It has been my purpose here, through the ethnographic praxis in the teaching of ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’ to show how a paradigmatic shift in education is needed to pursue social and educational equity. The historic, cultural and ethnographic information provided by the content of the course, coupled with my students’ experiences in their classrooms and the político economic analysis of the local context provided the infrastructural context to build a transformative pedagogy involving consciously building on the cultural strengths and human potentials of Latin@ learners. For Nieto (1999: 131):

If we understand teaching as consisting primarily of social relationships and as political commitments rather than a technical activity, then it is unquestionable that what educators need to pay most attention to are their own growth and transformation and the lives, realities and dreams of their students.

In fact, I think that the type of paradigmatic shift in education needs to be transformational. Teachers and students must become active participants in their learning and in the creation of new knowledge which provides them with a sense of ‘ownership’. This transformational education is informed by local contexts. Teachers and their students learn about their history and culture as much as their social and cultural identities. The participatory approach gives students and teachers the power to see themselves not as consumers of information and data but, rather, as researchers and creators of knowledge. What I am describing here is very similar to what Freire calls ‘Pedagogy of Liberation’ that requires a new way of thinking. For this, a teacher’s training is crucial (Valenzuela 1999, 2005).

The exact work that I have presented here is not replicable because conditions, history, cultural background and people will always differ, as Paulo Freire already warned us (1970). However, what I have described and analysed as principles, strategies and ideas can be applied to other cultural and political contexts. In Guajardo and Guajardo’s words, transformational education allows the introduction of global concepts viewed through local lenses (Guajardo and Guajardo 2008).

Teaching ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’ was an exercise in ethnographic praxis using teachers’ experiences in their classrooms and the content of the course as prime material to point out preconceived assumptions about Latin@ students. In fact, the ethnographic observations in both my classroom and the teachers’ classrooms facilitated insights of the critical analysis needed to fight against these assumptions, of which they were not aware. The articulation of these ethnographic observations with the conceptual and methodological anthropological tools used in the presentation of the course content, nurtured a learning environment that lead the students in ‘Mesoamerican Ethnology’ to a greater awareness of their actions, capabilities and possibilities in their own classrooms. This type of ethnography leads to intervention, as the teachers demonstrated in the selection of their research topics and the involvement of their Latin@ students and families in the research process. Thus, this ethnographic praxis inspires pedagogical changes to-
Awards a transformational model of education. This new way of thinking in Education involves the agency and dialogue of both teachers and students in the learning process. And the resulting empowerment of this learning process can result in direct actions to transform practice, policies and conditions in schools.

Alicia Re Cruz is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Texas. E-mail: arecruz@unt.edu

Notes

1. I participated in the research project Estrategias de Integracion Social y Prevencion de Racismo en las Escuelas I (Social Integration Strategies and Racism Prevention in Schools I) from 2005 to 2008 and Estrategias de Participacion Social y Prevencion de Racismo en las Escuelas II (Social Participation Strategies and Racism Prevention in Schools II), from 2009 to 2011. Both research projects were funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation in Spain.

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References


