

En *Living and teaching in a unjust world*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

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Heras Monner Sans, Ana Inés y Craviotto,  
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# 6 *Mediating Different Worlds: Bicultural Students at School*

Ana Inés Heras and Eileen Craviotto

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**T**he construction of a bicultural identity is a process both delicate and always in transformation. Often children play a specific role in this process, that of the mediation of different, frequently conflicting, worlds. In one short passage, fourth-grader Miguel makes visible his cultural, national, and linguistic identity. He chose to write in Spanish.

Cuernavaca es mi pueblo donde nací.

Vine a los Estados Unidos a encontrar mi nuevo estado.

Vine muy feliz y sé que me iré sin fin.

*I was born in the town of Cuernavaca. I came to the United States to find my new state. I came here very happy and yet I know I will leave this place [forever].*

Miguel is a bilingual student at McLaughlin Elementary (a pseudonym) in a midsize Southern California city. McLaughlin Elementary sits on top of a hill that looks north to Pacific ocean and south to the city. The school building, a spacious and well-kept Spanish colonial structure, hosts approximately 580 students, 30 teachers, 30 teacher aides, two secretaries, one nurse, and one principal.

Closed for several years, the school was reopened in 1986, with a principal who was selected to create a school program to respond to the specific needs of the community attending the school (85 percent Mexicano descent and native-Spanish-speaking or bilingual in English and Spanish). The school mission is to provide a homelike learning environment for all children attending the school; to consider that families and teachers alike are the children's educators; and to educate all children without making a distinction because of their socioeconomic or linguistic backgrounds. The principal promoted a

participatory decision-making model for faculty and families on issues that affected the school community.

Beginning in 1991, a team of teachers designed a bilingual program to provide education in two languages for all children. At the earliest grades a natural approach is used. Literacy is introduced in the first language, and the second language is used in context to promote language development in a relaxed atmosphere. The expectations for native English and native Spanish speakers are different. Students whose first language is Spanish are formally introduced to English in the second grade, and they are expected to function in English-only literacy instruction by the end of the fourth grade. Students whose first language is English are exposed to the Spanish beginning in kindergarten. Systematic Spanish instruction for them takes place in grades four and five.

It was in this context that we first began our collaboration. In 1992 Ana was a Ph.D. candidate and Eileen was a bilingual teacher. Although we were introduced to each other as part of a larger team conducting classroom research, our focus became directed at exploring students' language use in the classroom context. Soon, we were able to document the specific ways in which language and culture are intimately related, the ways in which opportunities for first- and second-language development through the direct use of students' cultural resources can be provided in the classroom context.

In 1995, Ana started teaching and doing research working in the Chicano Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. We continued our partnership so that we could support one another in critical dialogue about pedagogy and classroom practice; we also wanted to promote collaboration across the university and the fourth grade to support meaningful academic and social connections for our students.

Ladson-Billings (1995, 1998) has guided our work. She has written about the importance of using a model of culturally relevant pedagogy that affirms students' cultural and linguistic identity and promotes student achievement and a critical understanding of the world. There are three aspects to Ladson-Billings' approach.

1. a focus on academic achievement
2. a focus on the students' cultural competence
3. a focus on developing sociopolitical consciousness

As Ladson-Billings puts it: "It is not enough to individually be an academic achiever and be culturally competent, you also have to have a greater sense of community and be in a position to critique your

own education” to understand how social forces shape the experiences of others differently (Ladson-Billings 1998, p. 62). As we continued our partnership for a number of academic years we developed a university–fourth-grade instructional collaboration. Concretely, over the years 1992 to 1998, we developed several activities where our students interacted with each other to explore issues addressed in their curricula, shared their learning experiences, and used different forms of literacy to do so (oral, aural, written, visual, and so on.).

In 1995, we applied for and received a Community as a Classroom Grant from our County Education Office. We proposed that we would develop a curricular experience focusing on literacy and social studies through the use of oral history. Thus, oral history could foster students’ connections with their home-cultural resources through using knowledge in their families. We emphasized the use of oral communication with both fourth graders and undergraduate university students as a way to understand and reflect upon their positions in their families, their communities, and the school.

We educated the undergraduates in issues of oral history, classroom ethnography, and fourth-grade curricular design. We purchased twenty-five tape recorders and audiotapes as tools for both the fourth graders and the university students. We designed several activities to accomplish our goal. The activities included:

1. Weekly visits by the undergraduate students to the fourth grade classroom (an average of five students per week visited the classroom for a whole academic year)
2. Three annual visits by the fourth graders to the UCSB campus (one to include families for an undergraduate presentation on educational organizations that support underrepresented students)
3. Attendance by the undergraduate students at Eileen’s Family Math Nights every eight weeks
4. More recently we have begun to match the themes addressed by both the fourth-grade social studies curriculum and the curriculum for Chicano Studies in the classes I teach.

For example, in the winter of 1998, we asked our students to explore similar issues on a parallel schedule for one quarter, those related to prejudice, discrimination, and access to educational opportunities for different social and ethnic groups in the United States.

Over the years we have discovered that an important part of bringing the students’ cultural and linguistic resources into the classroom lies

in the micro-interactions between classroom participants, the everyday dialogues between the students and teachers, and between students and students (Cummins 1995, Heras 1995). We have observed that through dialogue and discussion, students developed several skills:

- the ability to reflect on their personal experience as it relates to that of others, or to the issue under study
- the ability to dialogue and push critical questioning and curiosity to the limit
- the ability to pose their thoughts orally and use the languages of several disciplines to do so
- the capacity to use multiple forms of literacy (aural, oral, written, and visual) to engage in dialogue.

In the fourth-grade classroom, there are multiple opportunities for micro-interactions. Dialogue takes place in several different formats: whole-class space (all students and the teacher dialoguing about issues under study); peer space in small groups; and pairs. The classroom is set up as an open space where visitors come regularly. Mixed groups or pairs of undergraduates and fourth graders are common.

Eileen works to foster a sense of inquiry through the use of multiple texts in their classroom; through seeing family knowledge as relevant text; and through the investigation of literary resources in Spanish and English. Students in her class have several opportunities to investigate their cultural and familial backgrounds in the context of the work done at school.

For example, in the fall quarter of 1995, several activities fostered students' inquiry on their backgrounds:

Interviewing family members on what respect means to them	September 1995
Reflecting on family geographical origins by identifying where their families come from on a map	September 1995
Interviewing family members on the origin of their names	October 1995
Interviewing family members on traditions around the Day of the Dead and Halloween	October 1995
Reflecting on best and worst school experiences	November 1995
Reflecting on people or places they missed	September through December 1995

The interviews and reflections were collected through oral and written means; when a piece of oral history was collected the fourth graders were asked to bring it to class to use it as part of their learning experience in language arts and social studies.

Miguel wrote about his identity as a recent immigrant Mexicano child in a letter to his teacher at the beginning of the year in a piece entitled “Mi Primer Viaje” (My First Trip)<sup>1</sup>:

La primera vez que vine a los Estados Unidos fue para [b]enir a los quin[s]e años de mi prima y después de eso fui a México y después me [b]ine a vivir aquí.

*The first time we came to the United States was when we came to celebrate my cousin's fifteenth birthday and then we went back to México and then we came back again to live here.*

Miguel's writing in class often revealed memories of his life in the other side of the border. (Translated from Spanish) “When we used to live in Mexico, we used to play with water balloons after school, every Friday.” Miguel provided other cultural pieces of information through his writing as well. He wrote down a rhyme he remembered from his hometown.

‘pa[c]é por tu ventana  
me tiraste con un limon  
la cascara cayo al suelo  
y el jugito en mi corazon.

*I was walking down your street and you threw a lemon at me; the peel (skin) of the lemon dropped on the floor and the juice poured into my heart.*

One day, in response to a piece of literature they were reading and discussing, Eileen asked the students to reflect on a place or person the children had missed, Miguel wrote in Spanish that he missed “his Mexico and his dog named Pipucho.”

Miguel's choice of content and of Spanish as his main language of expression demonstrate the fact that he saw himself as a Mexican immigrant child, who was happy to be here and in search of what he called his “new state.” Miguel also identified himself as a bicultural and bilingual child, as attested by his conversations, his writing, and observations of his interactions. At the end of the fall quarter, Miguel's class

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1 [ ] around letters or words indicates nonconventional spelling.

visited the university campus and shared their writing with Ana's undergraduate students. Each undergraduate was paired up with a fourth grader. The undergraduates taped one-hour interviews with the younger students. They followed up with a written account of their perspective on the fourth-graders' learning experiences. In his interview with Malín Ramírez, Miguel made explicit how he saw the connections between immigration, prejudice, and the hypocrisy associated with the motto "America, the land of freedom." Through oral sources (interviews with family members) and textual resources (newspaper clips), he learned about facts and he provided his views on the facts he collected through his research. Speaking in English, Miguel told Malín that "[Governor Pete] Wilson was the worst gringo of all because he wanted to get rid of all the Mexicans." Miguel further elaborated on his topic in his written text. His message said that "Wilson wanted Blacks and Mexicanos out of the country and that, therefore, this place could not be considered the land of freedom."

Malín took the initiative to visit Miguel at school twice during the fall quarter. In a paper entitled "Empowering the Youth of Aztlán: An Analysis of the Educational Experience of Miguel," Malín reflected on the issues posed by Miguel. Guided by previous course work in Chicano studies, Malín identified Miguel's struggle with his bicultural and bilingual identity and the influences of larger societal issues on his everyday experiences. Miguel did not use the terms bilingual, bicultural identity, or larger societal issues. Malín presented these issues as "cultural identity; bilingual/bicultural education; strong sense of self when immigrating to the United States." She used vocabulary and concepts learned in the Chicano Studies class Ana was teaching that quarter. In her final paper for the class, Malín describes Miguel's experience as one in which his strong sense of self had helped him navigate the state of border-crossing and borderland. Malín was impressed by the fact that Miguel, at such an early age, was able to reflect on these issues; she also stated that these issues had been a part of her own experience while growing up.

As part of our collaboration, Ana visited Eileen's classroom at least once a week. During these visits she assumed the dual role of researcher and educator, documenting the work the bilingual fourth-grade classroom, on the one hand, and teaching and learning with and from the children, their families, and their teacher, on the other hand. We collaborated on the Family Math Nights and used the parent workshops as opportunities to get to hear the families' perspectives on different issues. Additionally, Ana conducted interviews with a small group of students every two weeks, during lunch time, to

understand the schooling experience from their perspective. Ana utilized field notes to supplement the tape-recorded interviews and to record her own reflections:

*Miguel shows that his understanding of prejudice and immigration is informed by his membership in the Mexicano community. He is aware that part of the reason his family immigrated, according to his dad, was because his family was looking forward to having access to a different kind of education, and to becoming bilingual in English and Spanish. He perceives this process as a complex issue.*

Ana's reflections are supported through interviews with Miguel. In one interview, Miguel describes an incident at the border when U.S. border patrol agents chased and hit Mexican immigrants.

*Miguel:* You know that person that was in the car and they beat him

*Ana:* Aha

*Miguel:* So I put how can they say this place is liberty they should take off that Statue of Liberty

*Ana:* Mhm

*Miguel:* Mhm

*Ana:* Because why

*Miguel:* Because they are not treating us like liberty

Miguel elaborates on this topic in a written piece that he entitled "Cómo Agarran el Pan del Día" (How Immigrants Get Their Daily Bread).

We, immigrants do whatever we can in order to work so we can get food. We work in the sewing [industry] and we are also selling [things] on the street. We do not do any harm to other people and yet when we are on the streets, selling things, the police comes and they get what we have earned, even if that is our money to buy food.

As part of the curricular opportunities provided by Eileen, late each school year she asks students to choose topics of self-interest in order to conduct mini-research projects. Many students are interested in several topics, but choose to research only one. What was distinctive about Miguel, as compared to other students in his class, was that he was interested in several topics and he pursued research in all of them.

Originally, Miguel had chosen to study UFOs, Nazis, and immigration. During the inquiry process, Miguel decided not to explore UFOs but to concentrate on immigration, Nazism, and the formation and history of the KKK. Miguel explained his choice to further explore the issue of immigration “because half of my family is composed of immigrants.” Miguel continually wrote notes and reflected on his research topics.

One day Eileen asked her students to reflect on an issue that was problematic for the society at large, and on possible contributions they could make to help solve this problem. Miguel had been watching the news on incidents taking place at the border-crossing. It had been reported in the news that week that immigration officers had chased a truck of Mexican immigrants and had beaten a woman after the chase. Miguel wrote in both Spanish and English.

Nuestro problema más grande es la guerra. Yo creo que podría ser parte de la solución si yo le dijera a la policía que no peguen a la gente, que nada más los arrestaran. Our biggest problem is the war. I think I can help be a part of the solution by telling the police not to hit people—just arrest people.

It is interesting that Miguel chooses the word *war* in English. *Guerra* in the Spanish can mean war. Yet it is commonly used to refer to “daily struggle” in the Mexicano/Chicano community. Miguel’s use of *guerra* portrays his understanding of the daily struggles faced by immigrants, and the obstacles encountered when facing police violence. Continual reflection is even evident in Miguel’s written brainstorm of questions about the KKK:

who to interview: Ana, WWW [the World Wide Web], and Ms. D. [another teacher]

¿Qué significa la cruz quemada? [What does the burning cross symbolize?]

¿Porqué usan el uniforme blanco? [Why do they use a white uniform?]

¿Cómo empezó el grupo KKK? [How did the KKK get started?]

¿Tendrán contacto con los Nazis? [Did they have contact with the Nazis?]

¿En qué partes hay KKK? [Where is the KKK found?]

¿Ha sentido racismo? [Does racism make sense?]

¿Ha sentido prejuicio? [Does prejudice make sense?]

In April, Miguel wrote a letter to Ana.

Querida Ana,

Ana me gustaría que vinieras a jugar con nosotros y que si me podrías ayudar en mi reporte de inmigración.

*Dear Ana, Ana I would like you to come and play with us and also I would like to ask you if you can help with my report on immigration.*

Ana responded with a note, also in Spanish, that she had also enjoyed talking with him and hearing about what he is learning in class, and about the book they were reading in class. She stated that she'd visit his classroom soon to help him out with his immigration report and that she would look up some material for him at the library. On Ana's next visit she worked with Miguel. Ana reflects in her field notes:

*Miguel and I sat down to talk about Miguel's report. I had taken home Miguel's report and read it over the weekend. I came into the class to help Miguel and other children organize the information they were collecting for their reports. Miguel and I sat down mostly to organize the information; I had already talked with him about the content of his report. I had discussed with him the fact that he showed a very special awareness on this topic. Miguel had asked me to provide him with a notebook where he could write a book on the experience of being an immigrant, and I had done so (I bought a spiral notebook like the ones I used to write down my notes while visiting his classroom).*

*During our interview, Miguel read out loud the pieces he had written on immigration, showed me the interview notes he had taken while talking with his aunt about her immigration experience, and worked with me on organizing the way the final product (a poster on immigration) would look like. We discussed his ideas and drafted a possible plan to continue and finish his project.*

To help them carry out and complete their research projects, Eileen's students were once again paired up with Ana's students. The undergraduates helped the fourth graders do research at the university library on their self-selected topic. Students visited campus during the month of May. Following the visit, the fourth graders sent letters to their university buddies. This time, Miguel's undergraduate buddy

was Heather Ligtenberg. Miguel wrote his letter to Heather in both English and Spanish, knowing that Heather's first language is English and that she wanted to learn more Spanish:

Dear Heather,

Thank you for everything you did for me. And for helping me with my report. Also, thank you because you spent \$5 for my copies. We hope you have the opportunity to see the video of [immigration]. If you can rent it, we would like to see it. Thank you for everything. After we ate we went to the Beach. Miguel [a drawing of a computer is on the page]

Heather answered:

Dear Miguel,

Thank you so much for the thoughtful thank you letter. You were a pleasure to help in the library. You are a very intelligent student, and you know a lot about immigration and Governor Wilson. I hope we found enough information about immigration to help you with your research paper. I believe your research topic is a good topic and you will learn a lot from it. After I left the library I went to my Spanish class. I'm sorry I have not written your letter in Spanish but I am not yet good enough in Spanish to write you a letter in it. Thank you again and have a wonderful summer.

Sincerely, Heather Ligtenberg

In this letter exchange, it is interesting to notice that Miguel did indeed exercise his bilingual skills as a way to ensure communication with his buddy, and as a way to assert his bilingual identity. However, Heather chose to write only in English, and to comment that her Spanish was not good enough to write back in that language. When we asked the undergraduates to reflect on their learning experience with the fourth graders, Heather said that she was impressed by Miguel's knowledge of the subject and that she was also curious to know whether Miguel had formed his opinions on Governor Wilson at school or at home.

Miguel formed his opinions on the subject of immigration and discrimination of immigrants both at school and at home and as a member of the larger immigrant Mexicano community. Miguel, supported by his teacher, collected information from several sources in the context of this school assignment. When he researched the financial aspects associated with immigration, Eileen helped him locate one of his classmate's mothers as a resource. Miguel also interviewed his family members, took notes (in his small spiral notebook)

on all his interviews, and used these pieces of information to write his report.

The project enabled him to reflect on his family's perspective on issues related to their rights, such as education and liberty. It is possible that for Miguel, these issues were central to his experience, and were not seen as schoolwork, but as information he was interested in gathering. It was important that school provided him with the opportunity. Children like Miguel become aware of the circumstances surrounding their lives at a young age; they also become culture brokers for their families in the processes of making sense of who they are, what their rights are, and how to "make it" on this side of the border. Miguel's awareness of policies, politics, and practices against working-class immigration is an example of the importance that these issues have on immigrant children's everyday lives.

Through our analysis of six years of fourth-grade classroom data collected, we have found six key characteristics of curriculum and classroom practices:

1. Families are seen as resources for knowledge generation.
2. Multicultural literature is used as a resource for understanding different perspectives.
3. Students are regarded as active knowledge generators.
4. Classroom dialogue is a fundamental aspect of classroom discourse.
5. The classroom is an inviting space for exploration, learning, and dialogue.
6. Languages are used as resources for communicating and learning—not just Spanish and English but also the languages associated with academic disciplines, such as the discourse practices associated with social studies, maths, language arts, science, and arts education.

An emergent theme identified throughout our collaboration was that of children as cultural mediators. Thus it is important to consider the formation of bicultural identity as a process where both conflict and harmony co-occur, and are in constant interaction. In acting as mediators, children from borderland families serve as links between their communities of origin—ethnic communities, families, peer groups—and larger social contexts or institutions in the "host" society. Miguel is an example of a student who has started to integrate

different aspects into his identity, those associated with his active membership to the Mexicano, working-class, immigrant community, and those associated with his access to becoming bilingual and bicultural in his “new state.” Miguel’s awareness of his status as an immigrant and as a member of the working-class Mexicano community points to the obligation we have, as educators, to make every effort possible to understand children’s everyday lives.

## Reference

LADSON-BILLINGS, G. (1994). *The Dream Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.