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Guatemala: An Intercultural Perspective

Gloria Delany-Barmann
Western Illinois University

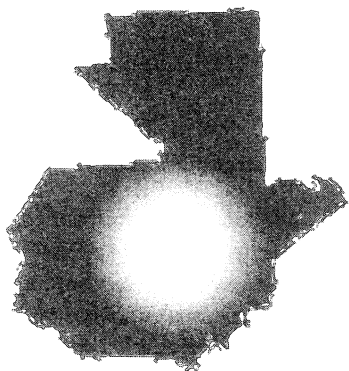
John W. Schwieter
Wilfrid Laurier University, jschwieter@wlu.ca

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Recommended Citation

Delany-Barmann, Gloria and Schwieter, John W., "Guatemala: An Intercultural Perspective" (2004).
Languages and Literatures Faculty Publications. 3.
https://scholars.wlu.ca/lang_faculty/3

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Guatemala

An Intercultural Perspective

BY GLORIA DELANY-BARMANN AND JOHN SCHWEITER



Our nation can only grow stronger if all our children grow up learning two languages. Our global economy demands it: our children deserve it.

Richard Riley, March 15, 2000



In July 2001, a group of 14 bilingual/ESL educators from Illinois traveled to Guatemala as participants in a Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program. The main purpose of the trip was to enhance the quality and quantity of intercultural education in K-12 schools, using Guatemala as a case study. The group, 12 bilingual/ESL teachers and the authors of this article, spent five weeks in Guatemala studying and working in bilingual schools in the Guatemalan highlands.

Multilingual and multicultural societies are by far the norm in this world. Many countries have acknowledged that fact in public policy. In Latin America, countries like Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador have clearly articulated in their educational policies (in varying degrees) the understanding that the desired outcome is not only a bilingual society, but an intercultural one as well (Hornberger, 2000). In 1985, this notion was clearly articulated in a new Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala “officially recognizing the multilingual, pluricultural nature of the society and the rights of its peoples to their ‘cultural identity with their values, their language, and their customs’ (Article 58)” (Richards & Richards, 1997, p.189). This public recognition was later underscored during the peace negotiations with the signing of the Acuerdo sobre Identidad y

Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas (Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous People) on March 31, 1995. The Congress on Educational Reform and Bilingual Intercultural Education followed shortly thereafter (Tay Coyoy, 1996).

Since the signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala in December of 1996, there has been a continued focus on indigenous language rights and bilingual intercultural education. The commitment to educational reform was underscored by a program begun in 1999 by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in cooperation with the Guatemalan Ministry of Education. These two agencies, in conjunction with more than 20 Mayan-interest non-governmental agencies (NGOs), began a four-year program designed to increase bilingual intercultural education in El Quiche. This particular region is home to a large Mayan population, 926,000 of whom are K’iche speakers. The USAID program is being implemented by World Learning and has four major components: 1) teacher preparation; 2) materials development; 3) community participation; and 4) policy coordination.

Guatemala is a linguistically and culturally diverse country. It is estimated that sixty percent of its 12 million inhabitants are indigenous (UNICEF, 1995). Amongst the indigenous population, there are 23 languages, 21 of which are Mayan. This rich linguistic and cultural diversity provides multiple challenges to educators. For example, policy makers must decide on the purpose of educational reforms dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity. Teachers often times must create many of their own

materials if they want them to be culturally relevant. They also face the challenge of involving parents and community members in meaningful ways in order to underscore their role in language and culture maintenance.

Like Guatemala, the United States is a linguistically and culturally diverse country. It is estimated that one out of five school-aged children speak a language at home other than English (Garcia, 2002). The case of our particular state (Illinois) further illustrates that diversity. According to the 1990 U.S. Census by the year 2050 the language minority student population in Illinois will experience a projected 141 percent increase outside of the Chicago area. This projection is further substantiated by the 1997 Public School Bilingual Census which revealed a total of 114 languages spoken by students in Illinois schools (Weinstein, 1998). This multitude of languages and cultures emphasizes the need for bilingual intercultural education.

GUATEMALA:

AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The group spent a total of five weeks in Guatemala, immersed in new sights, sounds, and smells. Though the focus was on education, the teachers also had opportunities to explore Guatemalan traditional and non-traditional healing centers, explore Mayan and Olmec ruins, visit religious centers, and talk with Peace Corps volunteers and volunteers of various NGOs. While the aims of the project were multi-faceted, the main objectives of “Guatemala: An Intercultural Perspective” were:

1. To increase teachers’ knowledge about Guatemalan culture and society

- through an intellectual and experiential framework;
2. To build relationships and bridges of understanding between U.S. and Guatemalan teachers, students, schools and communities;
 3. To strengthen Spanish language skills of bilingual teachers in an authentic setting;
 4. To create high-quality products, instructional materials, workshops, presentations, etc., for use in classrooms, schools and communities and for dissemination throughout our state;
 5. To increase resources for classroom instruction (This includes items such as books, photographs, slides, music, textiles, art, and other cultural artifacts); and
 6. To improve the future of international curriculum development in the Midwestern region by joining a network of knowledgeable colleagues and curriculum policy makers, both in the U.S. and abroad, with whom to collaborate.

We spent the first week in Antigua, Guatemala with intensive Spanish language and culture training at Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín. Even though the teachers were all bilingual, this first phase of the project was important because it gave the participants an opportunity to develop a basic understanding of Guatemalan language and culture before going out into the schools in Quiché. It also helped to increase the cohesiveness of the group. The teachers attended language classes in the morning (one instructor per two teachers) and made excursions with their teachers in the afternoons to various local points of interest. These experiences were complemented by lectures about Guatemala and instruction in the local language, Kakchikel.

The following two weeks were spent in the Highlands collaborating with Quiché and Ixil bilingual teachers in rural schools. This collaboration was arranged with PAEBI (Proyecto Acceso a la Educación Bilingüe Intercultural) and World Learning and the project director. The U.S. teachers worked in a different classroom every week, thus gaining a better overall perspective of classroom practices. The schools varied in the

amount of resources available and in their accessibility. All the schools were reachable by a road (a program prerequisite determined before embarking on our adventure), but sometimes lacked running water and/or electricity.

The teachers participating in this project are used to not always understanding all of their students. Some of them have up to nine different language groups in their classes in the United States. However, these teachers were now placed in a classroom where they were the ones who didn't speak the majority language. Especially in the earlier grades, many of the students had limited Spanish (their first language was K'iché or Ixil), and a majority of the instruction was in that language. This proved to be a reminder to the teachers of how their newcomer students feel upon arrival in a U.S. classroom.

In addition to the language issues that the participants were experiencing in the communities in which we were working, the participants also had to process their thoughts and feelings about the extreme poverty in the areas. One of the program participants commented, "I work with immigrant students in the U.S. and thought I understood poverty. I had 'done the reading' and was confident I knew what I was getting into there [in Guatemala]. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw" (Sept. 16, 2001).

The fourth week of the program the group traveled to Guatemala City to attend the First Hemispheric Conference on Indigenous Education. The conference brought educators from all over the world to discuss issues pertaining to language maintenance, language rights, bilingual pedagogy, and curriculum development. Teachers with whom we had been working in the Highlands also attended this conference, thus providing us with another context in which to interact and exchange ideas. For many of the teachers, it was also a much-welcomed respite from the physical and emotional challenges of living in the Guatemalan countryside.

During the final week of the project we headed to the coastal region of Guatemala. Here we worked for two days with pre-service Guatemalan teachers in the small village of Xejuyup. In the mornings the U.S. teachers provided

workshops to the pre-service teachers on topics such as cooperative learning, the writing process, study habits, emergent literacy, and educational psychology, etc. (These topics were determined with the school director before going to Guatemala with the group.) In the afternoons we collaborated with the teacher educators at the school discussing various teaching methods and philosophies of teaching.

Also of interest in this region were the ancient ruins of Abaj Takalic. These ruins are a mixture of the Olmec and Mayan civilizations. They are only partially exposed and provided an excellent opportunity to see an archeological dig in action.

Our final days in Guatemala were spent in Guatemala City, where we visited museums, Peace Corps sites, and various cultural and artistic centers. We also had the opportunity to see international schools in this urban setting. These schools provided an excellent contrast to the schools where we had been working. They were very well funded, and looked much like schools in upper-class neighborhoods in the U.S.

A highlight of our last days in Guatemala was a visit to a project called "Out of the Dump." More than 1,500 people live and work in the dump in Guatemala City. In 1991, a U.S. photographer, Nancy McGirr, was photographing children at the dump trying to find a way to encourage them to get off the streets. When she noticed their extreme interest in her camera she came up with the idea of giving them cameras to document their lives. Eventually she and the children began selling the black and white photographs as postcards. The children wanted to go to school so they used the money from their project to fund their education. This practice continues today and includes a lunch program for those who remain in school and attend the project three days a week.

The project has received international attention. The children have exhibited their work in Tokyo, London, Paris, and Amsterdam, as well as in California and Alabama. They have also been featured on National Public Radio, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times (among others). Some of the children participating in this project are now working for NGOs or for



Hollywood, or are continuing their education in Guatemala. One of the original project participants is now completing her master's degree in social work. The project has also expanded to include digital imaging and graphic design. In addition, the children (in collaboration with children from Europe and Africa) have created a wonderful board game that focuses on children's rights. Twelve years after the inception of this project, it now serves 82 children from five communities. (More information regarding this project can be found at their website at www.outofthedump.com)



CONCLUSION

Teachers often find themselves unprepared to work effectively with students from differing cultures and social classes. According to Razzano and Lorenz (1996), international programs can help facilitate an understanding that "focuses on ways in which people are interconnected across national boundaries and stresses the reality that interdependence creates tensions as well as opportunities" (p. 2). The participants in this project were reminded on a daily basis of this reality.

This project, "Guatemala: An Intercultural Perspective," provided United States and Guatemalan bilingual teachers an opportunity to work together toward addressing their many challenges. The teachers worked together developing materials and exploring possible ways to improve bilingual education. This experience underscored the concept of intercultural education in some very important ways. It focused on the collaborative work of Guatemalan and U.S. bilingual teachers who have the common goal of creating bilingual programs that affirm their students' linguistic and cultural diversity.

This experience also provided the U.S. teachers with a unique opportunity to reflect upon their own practice and beliefs regarding bilingual intercultural education. Oftentimes, placing ourselves in an unfamiliar setting allows us to discover those things that have become an unconscious part of our professional

practice (Guadarrama, 1997). By participating in this seminar, the U.S. teachers learned an immense amount about Guatemalan culture and linguistic diversity and its incorporation into their curriculum. Furthermore, they discovered important aspects about themselves as educators. At the same time, the teachers improved their level of Spanish. The need for bilingual classroom teachers to improve their academic language proficiency is one that has been discussed in detail by many scholars (Guerrero, 1997; Met & Lorenz, 1997).

For many of us, travel to other countries and cultural contexts rejuvenates us and provides us with the experiences that allow us to be good teachers for all of our students. The curricular change and new professional perspectives that are fostered through this type of experience enhances the international and intercultural viewpoint of all the participants. In our increasingly multilingual and multicultural society, it is indispensable that our teachers have cultural immersion experiences that allow them to enrich their curriculum, thus illuminating the multicultural mosaic that is our nation's schools.

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GLORIA DELANY-BARMANN is an Associate Professor of Bilingual/Bicultural Education at Western Illinois University.

JOHN SCHWEITER is a doctoral student in Spanish at Florida State University in Tallahassee.