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# Interculturality: Where Do We Go From Here?

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# Interculturality

## Where Do We Go From Here?

*Jennifer Lucko and Alicia Re Cruz*

This issue<sup>1</sup> provides striking examples of how current educational policies and practices play a fundamental role in processes that constitute immigrant and ethnic minority children as 'others'. This collective compendium not only interweaves theory and practice but also initiates a trans-Atlantic conversation about intercultural education embracing ethnographic cases from North America (Texas), South America (Bolivia) and Europe (Spain). These conversations lead towards an interesting exercise of similarities and differences in how interculturality is used and understood in the classroom, based on the local fluid composition of ideological, ethnic, political and economic factors. The exercise in comparison of these intercontinental ethnographic exercises points out crucial common themes that authors use as prisms to show the articulation of education policies and epistemological contradictions. It is with particular attention that these contributions examine educational policies and practices in intercultural contexts and their effects in essentializing the concept of culture as if it were a fixed attribute believed to determine students' behaviours, attitudes, school expectations and social relationships. Most of the ethnographic cases presented clearly document how cultural differences, rather than being seen as an asset in intercultural education contexts, are more often understood in terms of 'deficits'. In sum, the core anthropological contribution of these articles is centred on the analysis of the processes that lead to cultural reifications, how these transform into stereotypes that weigh down students' trajectories in schools, and how this culminates in the very opposite of the original intention of educational policies.

These ethnographic examples draw from distinct regions of the world – Spain, Bolivia, and the United States – to illustrate how historically and geographically specific processes in schools work to differentiate children according to their ethnic and racial backgrounds. In Spain, we highlight a process by which

high-achieving, self-disciplined immigrant students come to see themselves as not belonging and out of place, and ultimately leads many students to abandon their academic ambitions and even drop out of school (del Olmo, this issue). Indeed, we find that very few immigrant children in Spain are able to move successfully from the transitional one-year programmes for newcomer students (*aulas de enlace*) to pursue their educational dreams.

In Bolivia, the educational system works to reify stereotypical differences between indigenous and non-indigenous children. By specifying in the law that the intracultural component of schooling is necessary to 'promote the recovery, strengthening, development and cohesion within the indigenous people's cultures', the resulting educational policies and practices assume that indigenous students are not only fundamentally different from other children at their schools, but also possessing a static identity (Osuna, this issue). Likewise, Spanish bilingual teachers in Texas contribute to the portrayal of Latin@<sup>2</sup> students as 'others' by focusing their multicultural efforts in the annual organization of festivals involving traditional Mexican folkloric dances, music and food (Re Cruz, this issue).

The authors' contributions in this issue, however, are not limited to an analysis of how a discourse of 'culture' in the educational setting contributes to the essentialization of racial and ethnic differences. Equally important, these examples demonstrate how schools contribute to the replication of social hierarchies through everyday practices in individual classrooms. Thus, we suggest that teachers do *not* typically analyse culture according to Eric Wolf's pool hall metaphor in which distinct cultures are conceptualized as various billiard balls ricocheting off one another (Wolf 1982). Instead, in the presented examples we see that 'cultures' are conceptually stacked in educational settings according to value rather than understood to be rolling on an equally balanced billiard table.



In Spain, ethnographic evidence demonstrates that the 'culture' associated with students' country of origin – often discussed in terms of deficits – was central when determining students' educational placements in the *aula de enlace*. Spanish teachers commonly understood that 'culture' was a critical factor in the educational trajectory of students because of the ways in which culture affects students' behaviours, attitudes, school expectations and social relationships (del Olmo, this issue). These examples indicate that a discourse of multiculturalism in schools most often reifies, either implicitly or explicitly, a hierarchy of cultures (Mata-Benito, this issue).

Building on these ethnographic examples, the authors in this issue consider the persistent tendency among educators to focus cultural approaches in education on differences between groups (Mata-Benito, this issue). Taken as a whole, the ethnographic cases presented show clear examples of how educational policies rooted in a theory of interculturality most often continue to treat the cultural 'other' as different and anomalous. In this way, the critique of multicultural education recognized by anthropologists is neutralized, and the emancipatory capacity of intercultural education is undermined. Moreover, the educational system continues to reproduce discriminatory practices based on cultural differences though the creation of instructional programmes designed for specific cultural groups. We suggest, therefore, that multicultural and intercultural education should not be connected to any type of treatment that can be defined as compensatory or remedial, and should never be directed exclusively at immigrants or ethnic minorities. Moreover, discourses of 'integration' or 'inclusion' should be avoided as they are based on notions of 'difference as deficit' (Mata-Benito, this issue).

In highlighting the role of education in processes by which students come to understand ethnic and racial differences amongst their classmates, we conclude that many current educational efforts examined in this issue – including the *aulas de enlace* in Spain, intracultural–intercultural education in Bolivia and multicultural festivals in Texas – commonly stigmatize students, legitimize existing stereotypes and impede educational progress. Given these persistent dilemmas in education, we urge educators and educational researchers to continue to advance alternate educational policies and practices for teaching diverse student populations.

As a starting point, we agree that for real transformation in schools to occur the economic and social

structures of society must change as well. Following Jean Anyon (2005) we argue that larger macro-economic policies and practices need to be considered part of educational reform. We believe that the conditions for a true intercultural dialogue cannot be created solely in the educational setting, but must also be constructed within the economic, social and political structures of society (Mata-Benito, this issue).

At the same time, we must continue our efforts to move theory to practice in the classroom (Re Cruz and Hernández Sánchez, this issue). This issue demonstrates that anthropology is not only uniquely positioned to analyse, understand and explain educational processes, but also that classroom teachers can – and do – learn these anthropological tools and apply them in their teaching. Through the ethnographic description of teacher-education programmes in Spain, this issue allows us to envision how future educators might successfully take up and apply anthropological approaches when confronted with real dilemmas in their classrooms (Hernández Sánchez, this issue). Armed with the anthropological concepts of culture, a holistic perspective, cultural relativism and a critical approach to ethnocentrism, Spanish teachers enrolled in anthropology coursework are able to understand the complexities of their classrooms better and approach pedagogical challenges appropriately.

In Texas, Spanish bilingual teachers also demonstrate the power of ethnographic research to change educational practice. Re Cruz argues that the most effective pedagogical strategy to bring about an awareness of issues related to equity and social justice is to require classroom teachers to undertake their own ethnographic research (Re Cruz, this issue). Indeed, when teachers are able to choose research topics investigating something they find perplexing in their own classrooms they become invested in creating answers to these questions. In this way, ethnographic research has the power to transform teachers from passive recipients of anthropological theories to active producers of theories who own and practice this knowledge in their own classrooms.

The evidence presented here suggests that while there is no 'one size fits all' programme when considering questions of diversity and educational equity, educational researchers can be a catalyst for change when we do more than provide theoretical frameworks for others to implement in schools. Our hope is that in reading this issue, we might encourage more students, teachers and parents to become creators of knowledge, and in the process break down the divide

between anthropological theory and classroom practice. In doing so, our work interrogating existing educational beliefs, policies and objectives advances efforts to dismantle educational policies and practices constituting immigrant and ethnic minority children as 'others' in their own schools and communities.

## Acknowledgements

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The contributing authors are Spanish speakers and what is presented to the readers in this issue is the final product of a complex and intriguing process of several versions of translations, not only linguistic but also conceptual. Appreciation is extended to the anonymous reviewers whose invaluable questions, comments and feedback facilitated the conceptual flow and clarity of these articles. Special thanks go to Ian Watt, anthropology graduate student at the University of North Texas, for assisting with some of the translation. We also extend our gratitude to Christine McCourt, the editor of *Anthropology in Action*, whose encouragement and support has been present from the beginning to the end of this publication adventure.

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## Notes

1. These articles were presented in a panel titled *Interculturality: Anthropological and Interdisciplinary Contributions and Challenges* at the Society for Applied Anthropology Annual meeting, in Baltimore, U.S.A., in 2012. The organized panel at the SfAA conference was integrated by four presentations (Carmen Osuna's, Margarita del Olmo's, Patricia Mata-Benito's and Pilar Cucalón's) and a discussion led by Jennifer Lucko. In addition, Alicia Re Cruz, who was the organizer of the panel, contributes with an article on the complex diverse cultural scenario of the education system in Texas focused on Latin@ students and Caridad Hernández Sánchez contributes with an article on her experience of being an anthropologist in training, teaching students how to become teachers in the Spanish education system.
2. The term 'Latin@' is used in this issue, in order to signify gender neutrality.

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