

# Maestros/as Populares: A Project in Community Building

by  
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“Multiplicity” is a term defined by María Lugones (2003) in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* whereby she understands each person as many self(s) inhabiting and moving through many worlds. She states:

I am guided by the experiences of bicultural people...who are very familiar with experiencing themselves as more than one: having desires, character, and personality traits that are different in one reality than in the other, and acting, enacting, animating their bodies, having thoughts, feeling the emotions, in ways that are different in one reality than in the other. (p. 57)

One understands oneself in every world in which one remembers oneself to the extent that one understands that world. This is a strong sense of personal identity, politically and morally strong. The task of remembering one's many selves is a difficult liberatory task. One may indeed inhabit a world and a self one fails to recognize as oneself because one has no understanding of that world. (p. 59)

Lugones' description of multiplicity is fundamental to my understanding of multicultural education.<sup>1</sup> The students, as well as teachers, come to the classroom

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1 When I say multicultural education, I am not referring to a representative multiculturalism where one story from each culture is included in the curriculum, but rather a

inhabiting multiple worlds. By implementing a curriculum that affirms different worlds of understanding, we practice and appreciate seeing differences rather than focusing all of our attention on the commonalities. To focus solely on commonalities teaches us to see each other as the same, or as unitary, rather than seeing our multiplicity. However, a multicultural curriculum has the potential to open our minds to our multiple worlds and the significant sources of knowledge they provide.

### *Perils of No Child Left Behind*

Currently I work within the context of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB),<sup>2</sup> which, rather than promote a multicultural education, promotes a standard or unitary understanding of education. The students' academic achievement and the school's success are measured by how students perform on standardized tests. Prior to the implementation of NCLB, students who were not fluent speakers of English were not scrutinized for their performance on the standardized tests in English. Their achievement was assessed in a variety of ways, which included standardized tests in other languages. However in 2002, Congress passed the *Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students* (Title III) of NCLB which holds "state educational agencies, local educational agencies, and schools accountable for increases in English proficiency and core academic content knowledge of limited English proficient children" by requiring "demonstrated improvements in the English proficiency" each year as determined by the standardized tests (Public Law 107-110, p. 266). NCLB follows a larger trend of standardization in neoliberal policies which includes standard ways to evaluate "accountability." However, the question remains to whom and for what are teachers being made accountable?

As a result of NCLB, teachers are increasingly pressured into preparing students to perform well on the standardized tests. The knowledge and language used on the test is upheld as the important knowledge for the students to learn and retain. However, if the students are not doing well on the tests and come from a "low performing" school, there are more requirements placed on the school such as an enforced implementation of the standardized curriculum. Throughout the nation, many "low performing" school districts have been forced to implement the *Open Court* curriculum (2000), which even includes a script for teachers to read to students as they teach. The discussions among teachers around creative ways to implement curriculum and develop educational resources that engage our students have been stifled. The focus of discussions during professional develop-

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curriculum that goes for an in depth understanding of multiplicity and diverse worlds of knowledge in the face of the neoliberal move towards standardization and unitary understandings of people.

- 2 No Child Left Behind is national legislation passed in 2002 during the Presidency of George W. Bush, which incorporates the standardized tests as a way of making schools more "accountable" in receiving federal funds for public education.

ment sessions has transitioned into dealing primarily with how to prepare our students with the knowledge from the tests. Consequently, other knowledges and ways of knowing are not incorporated into the curriculum either for “lack of time” or because they are seen as unimportant and/or insignificant.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many of the students at my school who are not performing well on the standardized test are seen as deficient, without knowledge resources, ignorant, unmotivated, lazy, or as “behavioral problems.”

However, our students and their families bring with them a wealth of knowledge resources that we are “wasting” in educational institutions. This knowledge often is absented, not validated, or rendered backward, unworthy, or ignorant.<sup>4</sup> My concern is that not only do the teachers view the students as deficient, without knowledge resources, unmotivated, lazy, and ignorant in this environment, but that more importantly the students tend to mimic these attitudes towards their own families. The relationship between the students and the adults in their families and community becomes fragmented as the children are encouraged to value the standard knowledge and devalue the knowledge from home. For instance, fragmentation occurs as students are encouraged to choose Standard English as the language of knowledge and progress, and reject Spanish as the language of ignorance and poverty. To refer back to Lugones (2003), “one understands oneself in every world in which one remembers oneself to the extent that one understands that world” (p. 59). In other words, despite the fact that students live in multiple “worlds,” they may not see themselves as part of those “worlds” because they do not understand them. So for example, when a student’s mother discusses her social experiences in a rural town in Puebla, Mexico, the student may not identify with those knowledge resources or any of that history. This kind of fragmentation ruptures the students’ possibilities of understanding their “worlds” in richer, nuanced, and multiple ways as well as through and in multiple languages.

It is within this context that I share with the readers an account of an on-going project called *Maestros/as Populares*. However, before I discuss the project, I will begin by introducing the concept of “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, &

3 An exception within the Los Angeles Unified School District is the schools involved in the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP). The program encourages teachers to learn about the students’ home languages to then use that knowledge as a tool to teach the standard American and academic English language. The students are immersed in a contrastive analysis approach to learning two different “worlds” of English language. Furthermore, teachers integrate students’ histories and cultures in the daily curriculum. Noma LeMoine, the director, has been fundamental in developing this work. For further information on the program you can visit the AEMP website: <http://www.learnmedia.com/aemp/sixcritical.html>.

4 In *The Rise of the Global Left*, Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2006) presents the term “sociology of absences” that within the current neoliberal context refers to the ways in which we are constantly presented with a unitary understanding of knowledge which he terms the “monoculture of knowledge.” He claims that the monoculture of knowledge produces the non-existence or absence of other knowledges, “the social production of these absences results in the waste of social experience” (p. 18).

Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Then, I will describe some specific examples from educators in the Funds of Knowledge Project. Additionally, I will discuss the idea of “social networks” in order to understand how knowledge moves. I will end by discussing how I have incorporated these concepts in the Maestros/as Populares project.

### *Funds of Knowledge and Social Networks*

In thinking about how to incorporate knowledge from the community into the school curriculum, I appreciated the methods described in the Funds of Knowledge Project (González, et al., 2005). In this project, qualitative research was conducted that made connections between the university, elementary school, and surrounding Latino communities. The motivation behind the research was to design a curriculum that was both culturally relevant and that affirmed the multiple knowledges that students brought with them into the classroom setting. According to the authors, “funds of knowledge” refers to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household and individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). They explain, “It is specific funds of knowledge pertaining to the social, economic, and productive activities of people in a local region, not culture in its broader, anthropological sense, that we seek to incorporate strategically into classrooms” (p. 139). They claim that by incorporating these multiple knowledges in the classroom, we can develop a curriculum that “far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools” (p. 132). The Funds of Knowledge Project was created to put this new approach in designing relevant curriculum into practice. The project began with teachers and researchers visiting the students’ homes to conduct qualitative interviews to learn more about the students’ lives outside of the school setting and to document the “funds of knowledge” in their households. After conducting home visits, teachers worked with university professors to interpret the results of their interviews. During this process, the research team identified relevant themes that emerged throughout the investigation to design a learning module, or theme unit, into a classroom curriculum. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss two examples of learning modules created by the educators which emerged from their investigations of the “funds of knowledge” in their communities.

In putting this concept into practice, Amanti (2005) describes how after spending several weeks doing home visits and then consulting with her team, she developed a learning module based on the theme of candy. The theme was inspired by the home visits when it was discovered that one of the parents was an expert in making all kinds of candy and that the children had various experiences with candy. Amanti developed the unit to encourage the students to think more in depth about the theme and how even understandings of candy can differ. For example, some students considered snacks made with salt and spices candy, such

as *saladitos* and *picalimón*. The students posed several inquiry questions to investigate the topic further. After students spent time thinking about the theme, the parent was invited to the classroom “to contribute intellectually to the students’ academic activity” (Moll et al., 2005, p. 83). The curriculum in this instance was directly motivated by a theme relevant to the students’ daily lives and included the parent’s knowledge as a resource in their academic achievement. The curriculum was designed to deliberately incorporate the “funds of knowledge” from the community.

In her essay entitled, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Planning a Funds of Knowledge-Based Curriculum Module*, Patricia Sandoval-Taylor (2005) details another example of how “funds of knowledge” were incorporated into the classroom curriculum. Her learning module was based on the theme of “construction” since that was a topic that came up frequently during her home visits (p. 153). Over the summer, she planned with the Funds of Knowledge Project consultants and came up with many ideas as to how to further develop the theme of “construction.” These ideas included: 1) comparing how homes differ in diverse climates and regions of the world, 2) studying what kinds of building materials are used to make different structures, 3) providing free time for the exploration of building with various materials such as lumber scraps, spaghetti, or cubes, 4) learning about blueprints, including examining the school’s blueprints, and 5) practicing pouring plaster to build small structures. The learning module was inquiry-based, meaning that the students participated in directing their own learning. At the beginning of the unit, the students developed questions about construction that they wanted to research and Amanti provided literature on building for the students to explore. Later on in the unit, Sandoval-Taylor invited parents with construction experience to come to the classroom, discuss their knowledge in construction, and answer students’ questions.

In reflecting on the implementation of the learning module, Sandoval-Taylor comments,

My students flourished in ways that I did not expect. I believed my students had internalized what they were learning because what they brought from home surrounded and supported their learning. The context was provided and I was able to teach additional content within this realm. (p. 162-3)

Sandoval-Taylor provided “multiple access to the content,” meaning that she provided many diverse ways for the students to make meaning of the larger concept of “construction.” Thus, through a variety of classroom activities related to the theme, inquiry questions, investigations at home, and classroom interviews, the students increased their knowledge regarding construction. When students broaden their understanding of a concept through experiences both at school and at home, they simultaneously begin to recognize and appreciate the academic resources that also exist in their communities.

In addition to exploring the knowledge within communities, educators and researchers in the Funds of Knowledge Project reflected on how knowledge moves among people, both at school as well as in the community. Amanti (2005) points out the importance of “positive, affirming, and mutually respectful relationships” in the learning process at school, and argues that “even academic knowledge must be distributed through social relations” (p. 140). According to Moll, et al. (1992), knowledge moves in the community through “social networks” that “facilitate the development and exchange of resources, including knowledge, skills, and labor, that enhance the household’s ability to survive and thrive” (p. 133). A significant characteristic of the networks are that they are “flexible, adaptive and active, and may involve multiple persons from outside the homes” (p. 133). The concepts of “funds of knowledge” and “social networks” have helped me to articulate the work evolving in the Maestros/as Populares Project in our community.

### *Maestros/as Populares*

Maestros/as Populares is an alternative educational model created with the families of my students that connects the knowledge of the home/community with the knowledge that is being developed at school, and which consequently transforms the imposed standardized curriculum. Every year I invite the families of my students to meet in a space outside of the formal school institution to discuss themes related to the standardized school curriculum. Based in East Los Angeles, the project provides an opportunity for students from Mexican, Salvadorian and Guatemalan immigrant families to develop relationships with each other outside of the school setting in addition to providing a space for family and community members to build relationships with each other. Over time, the students begin to appreciate the knowledge resources that exist in their communities while expanding their academic knowledge. Furthermore, the space has enabled me,<sup>5</sup> the teacher, to learn more about the different “worlds”<sup>6</sup> of my students and their families. The name of our group, Maestros/as Populares, affirms that each one of us has something to teach and learn. Moreover, Maestros/as Populares is a project in community building that puts into dialogue different ways of knowing and provides a space to exchange “funds of knowledge.”

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5 I did not grow up in the community but migrated to the community about twenty years ago from the Northeastern United States. I come from European ancestry and learned Spanish as a second language.

6 In trying to understand my students and their families’ in their “worlds,” I specifically refer to cultivating an attentiveness to people in their lives in East L.A., and their descriptions of where and how they grew up. Here I am thinking about the complexities in what people value, their relations to others, the economy, the Earth, and surroundings, and how that changes depending on one’s context/condition, rather than going for an ossified understanding of culture. My racialized/gendered/cultural location affects my understanding. For further discussion, see Lugones’ article *Playfulness, World-Traveling and Loving Perception* (2003) and González’s article, *Beyond Culture: The Hybridity of Funds of Knowledge* (2005).

In addition to being a space for people to develop knowledge, *Maestros/as Populares* functions as a social network. Members from over twenty different families meet on a regular basis in an educational setting, where they enjoy food, talk, and hang out. During the meetings, an array of knowledges are exchanged that bolster relationships in the community. It is through this process that new relationships are formed. The relationships are not based on extended family ties or hometown ties, but new connections made during the *Maestros/as Populares* meetings. Throughout the years, families that have met each other during the meetings invite each other to social events in their homes, converse when they meet on the street, and share information about jobs and housing.

*How the Connection is Made: Classroom Curriculum and Maestros/as Populares Meetings*

Currently, I teach in a large elementary public school with over one thousand students. More than eighty-five percent of the students are eligible to receive free lunches. More than seventy-five percent of our students are considered “English Learners” whose primary language is Spanish. The school is in its third year of being designated “low-performing” as a result of not enough students scoring proficiently on the standardized tests as outlined by NCLB. Consequently, the *Open Court* standardized curriculum has been imposed at our school.

In planning the *Maestros/as Populares*<sup>7</sup> meetings, I considered the funds of knowledge in the community where I teach and live. The following table (see Table 1) reflects the informal research I have conducted in the community over the past sixteen years. Because of the mandated curriculum, I had to develop a learning module that connected to the themes outlined by *Open Court* and the California fourth grade standards in Science, Language Arts, and Social Science. As such, I sought to propose themes to the families that were relevant to the mandated curriculum and yet connected to other ways of thinking and knowing that exist in the community. The themes that emerged were bilingualism, rural and urban experiences (which connects to an *Open Court* theme and Social Science standards), rituals and concepts around death in the Day of the Dead celebrations (which connects to a Social Science standard), and medicine (which connects to an *Open Court* theme, Social Science and Science standards).

*Table 1: Funds of Knowledge in the Community*

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7 I have facilitated the *Maestros/as Populares* meetings for sixteen years. The idea was initiated in dialogue with the *Escuela Popular Norteña*, a popular education school based in New Mexico. The discussions and interactions in the *Maestros/as Populares* meetings for the past sixteen years have served as a method for doing ethnography to understand the “funds of knowledge” in the community. This year, I deliberately used the approach of connecting the standard classroom curriculum to the themes of the meetings.

Medicine	Economics	Construction	Agriculture	Language and literacy
Herbal knowledge, massage, healing practices	Small business management, buying wholesale, budgets, accounting, marketing	Laying cement, masonry, tiling, painting, carpentry	Crop planting, horse riding, collective ownership of land, knowledge of soil and irrigation systems	Spanish, Mayan, Caló, English, vocabulary from different regions of Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador

### Bilingualism

For the first meeting we gathered together to celebrate the *Grito de Dolores*, the cry for freedom. This holiday marks the moment when the people in the town of Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato (Mexico) cried out for independence from Spanish colonial rule in 1810. During our celebration, we discussed the current struggles in California against anti-immigrant and English-only policies. It was within the context of this conversation that we began to discuss the theme of bilingual education. Throughout the meeting, we dialogued about different ways in which the families were incorporating some kind of bilingual or multilingual education for their children in the face of these policies. During the meeting, we primarily spoke in Spanish. All of the students in my class learned Spanish as their first language. In all of my students' households, Spanish and English are spoken with Caló, and Mayan is spoken in some households as well. The students are all in a Structured English Immersion classroom setting, meaning that literacy instruction is in English but Spanish can be used to clarify meaning. There were disagreements on whether or not the children should only speak Spanish in the house, whether or not the adults should learn English to help their children in school, and whether the children should be corrected when they use Caló or Spanglish (like *marqueta*, *kiquear*, *puchar*). However, everyone agreed that the children are in danger of losing their primary language(s).

Throughout the meeting, many of the children claimed that they did not know Spanish, even though their parents communicated with them only in Spanish. We discussed creating the Maestros/as Populares meetings as a space where Spanish could be cultivated. As a result, the conversations took place primarily in Spanish,

and the children were asked to write up their reflections of the meeting in Spanish with the help of their families. However, we agreed that the reflections would also be accepted in English, recognizing that the student had to translate what he/she heard in Spanish in order to write in English. The reflections were a tool to assess what the students understood. For example, with her dad's help, one of the students who didn't have any formal literacy education wrote her reflection in Spanish after the meeting:

*En la reunión de hoy, se habló de diferentes culturas y idiomas. Como mi papá que está cambiando su idioma de español a inglés todo para que me ayude a mis tareas y para que se comuniqué conmigo y yo tengo que aprender el idioma español para comunicarme con mi familia. También de la cultura de México me la enseñaron mis papás para aprender algo de sus culturas.*

In the meeting today, we spoke about different cultures and languages. Like my father who is changing his Spanish language to English all so that he can help me in my homework and so he can communicate with me and I need to learn the Spanish language so I can communicate with my family. Also, my parents taught me about Mexican culture so I can learn something about their cultures. (Author's translation)

Notably, this student did not yet identify with this world in her writing; it is *their* culture, not hers.

This initial meeting was important in that it established a bilingual educational setting for the students. They were in an English language setting in the classroom, but the Maestros/as Populares meetings opened up the educational space to motivate them to listen, speak, and write in Spanish. Furthermore, the Maestros/as Populares space incorporated oral histories as a tool for learning which required an attention that is different than learning from reading textbooks.

### *Rural and Urban Experiences*

The imposed standard curriculum calls for an understanding of the *Open Court* (2000) theme of Risks and Consequences. The California Social Science Standard requires that students demonstrate an understanding of the physical and human geographic features that define places and regions in the state. In the *Open Court* textbook, the students read different stories related to risks and consequences. In the social studies textbook, the students read descriptions about the differences between rural and urban regions in California. The students charted the information that they were learning by comparing and contrasting the descriptions from the book. However, during the charting process students did not make many connections between what they were reading in their textbooks and their own experiences. Most of the students had only lived in the urban environment of Los Angeles as a result of their parents' migration. Similarly, the stories about risks and consequences did not spark a connection between their experiences or

experiences in their families' lives. Although the students were able to express an understanding of the concepts, the textbook descriptions did not lend that understanding any depth.

The theme of the October 2008 *Maestros/as Populares* meeting was to describe the differences between an urban and rural setting. I knew that many of the adults in our group had migrated from rural settings where their ancestors had lived for hundreds of years. Implicit in their migrations were many risks and consequences. During the meeting, the adults took turns relating stories about growing up in a rural environment, a world very different from the one in which they lived at the time. Adults described in detail how they had a lot of freedom to explore their surroundings, climb trees, work in the fields, and play with hand-made things. Through the discussion, we learned about different foods they ate, their knowledge of plants and animals in their environment, and their relationship to the land. The children were interested in the different stories and asked a lot of questions. Later, they charted the differences between the urban and rural experiences in their reflections.

One student incorporated a T-chart (a tool we use in the classroom) to reflect on what he learned. On one side he wrote that in the rural environment many families work in the fields, eat the food that they grow, and sell food at the market. On the other side, in the urban environment, he wrote that people buy their food in the markets and shops. In the urban environment, he described that there are more job opportunities, but in the rural environment there is more freedom. In the urban environment, he wrote how people use cars, buses, metros and taxis for transportation but in the rural environment, people use animals and trucks for transportation.

Another student wrote about how in the urban environment, there are a lot of people and in the rural environment, there are not as many people. She explained that the quality of air is different and the animals are different. Another student carefully listed all the animals he heard named in the rural environment which included horses, goats, cows, roosters, pigs, sheep, turkeys and rats. After having the discussion with the adults at the *Maestros/as Populares* meetings, the students were able to relate a more abstract idea from their social studies book to personal experiences related by the adults.

In addition to noting the differences between rural and urban settings, the children received a lesson in contemporary migration at the *Maestros/as Populares* meeting. From the conversation, the children learned how dramatically their families' lives have changed. During the meeting, we discussed the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, which caused over one million small farmers in Mexico to migrate to urban centers in Mexico and the United States because they could no longer survive harvesting corn. Several parents noted how corn is currently imported from the United States and sold at a cheaper price to Mexico even though corn originated in Mexico. Most of the students come from families who for generations lived harvesting corn on small

plots of land before migrating to Los Angeles. The students heard stories about experiences migrating to the United States that involved taking big risks, such as walking through the desert, hiding in small places with many people, and being without food for days.

In the classroom, we discussed their parents' stories of migration and considered the risks and consequences. Many of the students came to understand the path of their parents' lives as connected to their own paths. Introducing vocabulary such as "ancestors," "generations," "oral history," and "migration" enabled the students to make those connections. The students realized that they would not be living in Los Angeles if it were not for their parents' migration. Furthermore, the students not only gained a deeper understanding of the human and geographic features of the land in California, but also of those in Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. As a result of the meeting students raised the following questions: Why do so many people have to leave their land to come to the United States? What happens to the land in the rural areas? And, why do the people from the United States cross the border without taking a risk but people from Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador have to risk their lives to come here? By connecting the knowledge shared at the Maestros/as Populares meeting to an expanded classroom curriculum, the students developed in-depth understandings of the concepts from the standard curriculum and, at the same time, became increasingly curious about the knowledges that already exist in their communities.

### *Rituals and Concepts around Death in the Day of the Dead Celebrations*

In November, the theme was rituals and concepts around death in the Day of the Dead. In the classroom, the California Social Science standard states that students should be able to describe the social, economic and cultural life and interactions among people of California from the pre-Colombian societies. The California English Language Arts standards require students to compare and contrast information on the same topic, and write narratives that relate ideas, observations, or recollections of an event or experience. I incorporated these standards and provided additional resources in the classroom to focus on understanding the "world" of the Day of the Dead, which is a celebration that originates from pre-Colombian societies. I provided a reading packet that described the Day of the Dead and included images of skeletons by Jose Guadalupe Posada, a famous Mexican artist. We watched a video about celebrations of the Day of the Dead and collaborated in building a school-wide altar in the auditorium. The students made Venn Diagrams to compare and contrast information they learned from the reading and the video. We made a double T-chart to name the social, economic and cultural aspects of Day of the Dead. Later, the students wrote essays describing the holiday of the Day of the Dead.

The November Maestros/as Populares meeting began by taking a walking field trip to the cemetery. The first day of November is the day set aside to re-

member the children who have died. On that day, there is not a clear distinction between life and death because the day marks a transitional space between the different existences. That day, our group met in front of the school and painted the children's faces as skeletons (see Figure 1). With our faces painted, we walked along the main boulevard to the cemetery. Cars honked and people waved, happy to see us. Along the way, we stopped at a local business where the tombstones are carved. The owner of the shop explained to us the process involved in preparing the stones, which he buys from India, along with the prices he charges for them. Afterwards, we stopped at the flower shop where we saw bundles of *cempasúchil* (marigolds). The flower has a strong scent and in Puebla, Mexico, the petals are used to make a trail from the street into the houses marking the path to welcome the souls back. We eventually arrived at the cemetery where we saw tombstones adorned for the Day of the Dead, some of which had elaborate decorations with food offerings and little presents. Students conversed with people in the cemetery asking questions about their family members who had passed.

*Figure 1: Picture of Students with Faces Painted as Muertos. Photo by author.*



After spending time in the cemetery, we were invited to a student's house, where the family prepared *mole* for everyone. *Mole* is a traditional ancient food that is set out on altars, particularly in Puebla, for the souls to eat. It is made with many ingredients including chocolate, *chiles*, and peanuts. After eating, we had the formal Maestros/as Populares part of the meeting where different adults spoke to the children about how they celebrated the Day of the Dead. The celebrations were different depending on the geographic location from which people origin-

ated. For example, the adults who came from Puebla spoke about very elaborate altars prepared in their houses that included *mole*, bananas, pictures, candles, water, *cepasúchil*, and different things the person enjoyed while alive. While in other regions the altar in the house did not play such a significant role, people did put up pictures with candles but did not arrange a huge table filled with food and offerings. Mostly everyone mentioned that the celebration included going to church on that day. In some regions, people celebrated all night in the cemetery with music, food and candles. In a town in Zacatecas, there is a big fair on the Day of the Dead. During the meeting, the children listened and again asked lots of questions. Later, they compared and contrasted the information they learned from their families' stories. For the reflections, students wrote long multi-paragraph narratives of their experience that day.

Back in the classroom, we compared and contrasted the Mesoamerican<sup>8</sup> understanding of death to the European understanding of death in Halloween. In the European understanding of death through the tradition of Halloween, we dress up in costumes to trick death so that death does not come to get us. Many times people do not want to talk about people who have died because death is associated with sadness. The European understanding does not allow for the possibility of having a relationship with someone who has died, because once they have died they are separated from us (the living).

The students discussed the differences in the images of blood and terror presented in Halloween, and the images of skeletons from Jose Guadalupe Posada. The skeletons, for instance, are represented as participating in the regular activities of living people such as cutting hair, cooking, and riding a bike. The cemetery is viewed as a place for social gathering, not a scary place. In Mesoamerican culture, death is something that is welcomed, because in this world we can still visit with the people we know who have died. It is not a sad time, but a time of celebration with music, food and fairs. The students identified all of the business that is created as a result of the celebration; for example, businesses making sugar skulls, selling candies, candles, *cepasúchil*, fruits and other ingredients for the altars exist in our community. The Day of the Dead is a time of social activity in Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and California because people visit each other's houses, see each other at church and spend time together in the cemetery. One of the students wrote:

The Day of the Dead is an ancient folklore tradition. The Day of the Dead starts Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> and ends Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>. The people that died in your family come back to the living... The dead are part of our history and our family. People feel sad when people in their family die, but they should be happy that they are coming back.

8 I use the term Mesoamerican to refer to ancient indigenous cultures throughout Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and other parts of Central America. In her book, Sylvia Marcos states, "Most scholars assume a common cultural core, manifest in similarities of symbolic meanings, rituals and social practices, medical knowledge, architectural elements, and iconographies, writing systems (pictograms, hieroglyphs, pictographs), and measurement of time (calendars) among the diverse peoples of Mesoamerica" (2006, p. xx).

If they cry when the souls are coming back, their path will be slippery. If a glass tips over and no one touched it, that is how the dead speak. Death is a portal to other existences.

Through this expanded curriculum in the classroom that incorporated the knowledge formed at the Maestros/as Populares meeting, the students were able to describe the Day of the Dead as woven into their own social, economic, and cultural experiences as people living in California of Mexican, Guatemalan and Salvadorian descent. Pre-Colombian societies were not understood as a disconnected world from the past, but surviving and thriving through them and in their community. Significantly, the students began to recognize and appreciate rituals in their own home and community as connected to a long history of indigenous knowledge in Mesoamerica. Furthermore, they were able to distinguish between the different concepts of death in Mesoamerican and European societies. Connecting the Maestros/as Populares field trip/meeting to the classroom curriculum gave students rich, interactive, meaningful and motivating experiences from which they could write and reflect while gaining an in depth understanding of the standards.

#### *Medicine: Remedios Caseros and Mesoamerican Ways of Healing*

In the classroom, the theme for the *Open Court* (2000) curriculum is Medicine, while the Life Science standard is to understand how living organisms depend on one another and on their environment for survival. The English Language Arts standard is to create multiple-paragraph compositions. In the *Open Court* textbook, almost all of the stories discuss Western scientific medicine and modern science as the way to heal. The first story in the unit focuses on the “history” of medicine. However, it only focuses on the European development and understanding of medicine. All other understandings of medicine are referred to as “magic.” Furthermore, all Chinese, African, and Mesoamerican understandings of health and healing are absent or described as “folk medicine.” In the Life Science textbook, the underlying concept for understanding survival is food as energy. I included health as a component for survival. Additionally, I presented another understanding of medicine to the students to compare to the Western scientific understanding. One of the stories in the textbook entitled *The New Doctor* lends itself well to contrasting these different worlds.

Rather than use the ambiguous term “folk medicine,” I focused on Mesoamerican medicine as a way to expand the curriculum. I used concepts from Sylvia Marcos’ (2006) book *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* to explore the differences between western scientific and “folk” medicine. In creating curriculum for the classroom, I considered the concept of duality in Marcos’ description of how the inside and outside of the body are seen as permeable in Mesoamerican understandings of healing. She writes:

In the Mesoamerican tradition, the body's characteristics are very different from the ones that define the anatomical body of modern medicine. For instance, interior and exterior are not separated by the hermetic barrier of the skin. Between interior and exterior, there is an exchange of a sort that modern, professional doctors do not understand. Moreover, the material and the immaterial are not conceived as exclusive opposites but rather as complementary sides or poles on a spectrum of continuously interacting and mutually redefining fluid shades. (p. 7)

To illustrate the Mesoamerican concept of body, I made a circle with all the students holding hands. The circle represented the skin of the body. We discussed how in the Western European way of thinking, related in the first *Open Court* (2000) story *Medicine: from Past to Present*, the separation between inside/outside posed a problem. The doctors could not “see” the inside of the body. They did not know how to attack disease inside the body until the invention of the vaccine. The Western European way of thinking understands the skin as a barrier, shield, or border between the inside and the outside of the body. Medicine is given in the form of pills, shots, and vaccines to reach the inside of the body. The students related their own experiences of doctors giving them shots or prescribing pills. Then I asked the students what they thought about that. Did they see that it was possible for there to be a moving path, like a river, between the inside and the outside of the body? Some of them talked about the mouth or the nose as passages from the inside to the outside and vice versa. I asked them about the skin; could they see a possibility of a fluid relationship between the inside and outside through the skin? In response, one student stepped “into the body” we had formed by stepping under our linked arms and back out again. Suddenly, the students began to imagine how there could be a fluid relationship between the inside and outside of the body and imagine how energy could flow back and forth from the inside and outside of the body. We stood with our hands close together, but not touching, and they could feel the heat between the hands.

After the discussion, the students made a T-chart (Figure 2) to differentiate between Western scientific (modern science) and Mesoamerican ways of healing.

On both sides of the chart, students named ideas that came from their own experiences. They identified the Western scientific way as coming from European cultures and Mesoamerican way as coming from indigenous cultures. The students mentioned that many of them had experiences with a healing practice that uses a raw egg. In this practice, the raw egg is rubbed all over their skin and then cracked open in order to “read” a diagnosis. Some students talked about how smells, or aromas, are used in healing. One student shared a story about healing with rose petals. We came up with an image showing the inside separate from the outside on the western scientific side, and the flowing back and forth (duality) on the Mesoamerican side. As we named these ways of healing, many stories emerged.

Modern Science	Mesoamerican
European culture	indigenous
doctor	Curanderas
pills	herbs
shots, injections	tea
Surgery	brain surgery -
suture	Mayans
brain surgery	massage
X-ray	Agua bendita
	hot baths
	eggs
	rose petals
	aroma

  

<p>inside outside of body</p>	<p>Duality -</p>
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Figure 2: Western Scientific (modern science) and Mesomeric Ways of Healing

One student spoke of a time that she had *susto*,<sup>9</sup> where she had been frightened by dogs and was vomiting. Her family took her to a *curandera*. The *curandera* had her take off her clothes and put them in a pile on the floor. Rose petals were laid out on her clothes. Then, the *curandera* took the rose stem and beat the clothes in the form of a cross. She sprinkled *agua bendita* (blessed water) on the clothes. She made the sign of the cross on both of her wrists as well as her head and feet. She was then instructed to put her clothes on again and put the rose petals in her

<sup>9</sup> Marcos (2006) discusses *susto* as related to “soul loss,” when the *tonalli* (whose principal dwelling is in the head) leaves the body in an unexpected experience (p. 6).

pockets. She had to sleep in her clothes that night with the rose stem under her pillow. The student stated that the next morning she felt better.

In the context of our discussion, we were able to understand her story as coming from a different world of understanding. In this case, healing involved a spiritual relationship with the body (for example, the form of the cross and the use of *agua bendita*). The *curandera* was not trying to put something inside her body to heal her, but the ritual involved her taking off clothes that were then treated and placed back on her skin. The rose petals and rose stem were also part of the healing that stayed with her throughout the night. Perhaps the aroma from the petals also played a part in the healing. From a Western scientific understanding, this kind of healing does not make any sense and appears as “magic.” However, since the students had another frame of reference (the concept of duality from Mesoamerica), the students were able to make some sense of the healing practice, or at least recognize it as coming from another world of knowledge. Furthermore, the students differentiate their own experiences as coming from two worlds of understanding, Mesoamerican and Western scientific. That night for homework, the students began to investigate other ways of healing that treat the body as permeable. The students wrote several short stories of Mesoamerican ways of healing and differentiated them from the Western European understandings of healing.

During the Maestros/as Populares meetings, we began the theme of medicine by focusing on herbal remedies. I worked with one of the fathers in the group who had studied herbal medicine in Mexico. We came up with a graph to help the students organize the information as the adults explained different ways to prepare herbs for medicine. The chart included the name(s) of plants, their properties and medicinal uses, whether it is cultivated or grows wild and different methods of preparation. Many of the adults brought pieces of plants as samples we could touch and smell to determine their properties. The adults shared different herbal remedies that they were aware of for curing earaches, stomach aches, stress, “*susto*” (fright), cramps, hemorrhoids, constipation, and skin problems. The students listened carefully and asked questions. Figure 3 is an example of one of the charts.

After the meeting, the students were motivated to find out more about plants and their medicinal qualities. Some of the students researched information on the Internet. The students brought in elaborate reflections with pictures printed from the Internet, drawings and multi-paragraph writings about the plants.

In the second meeting, one of the mothers told us about a community garden that she started with others in one of the neighboring communities where she used to live. In the garden, they harvest many plants with medicinal qualities. All the other Maestros/as Populares were very excited to hear about this garden. We asked if we could go visit, and the next month thirty of us travelled to spend the afternoon in the garden. While we were there, we had an opportunity to dig in the dirt and pull out weeds and learned ways to distinguish the herbal plants from the other greens growing in the garden. One of the members from the garden

shared with us that you can put waste that comes from the earth in a bucket with holes, cover it with leaves, water it for 260 days and it will turn back into soil. Most of the members in the community garden group identified as indigenous and seemed interested in developing a different relationship to the land than the Western capitalist exploitative relationship. They articulated this different world of understanding as they talked about the Earth and how they take care of the garden. Since we spent the afternoon working, when we left the farm, we were offered tall stalks of sugar cane to take with us. This Maestros/as Populares field trip led us to make new connections with people in a special place not far from us. Furthermore, the people from the garden immersed the children in a different world of understanding.

Nombre de la planta	propiedades	fines medicinales	silvestre o cultivada	manera de preparación
Altamisa	verde plantas largas olor fuerte	•quita el dolor de cabeza por causa del aire •dolor de estomago •colicos y menstruaeron molerlo y banar a los tos para elomac	es cultivada tiene que ser sembrada	-un té -mezclado dolor de cabeza -papel aluminio con poco alcohol y poner a se todo de los ojos herbir en agua y dos hojas y tomar(té)
comida abundante hierba buena	•verde •con olor	•dolor de estomago (dijestion) •para las tos (leche de hienaa buena) •para los colicos de los bebes •mal aliento •heridas	•cultivada	•bebido en agua té. •Se la puede comer una. •para el mal aliento •leche herbida con hierba buena
mercadela	Flor anarjada •hojas largas •verdes •olor fuerte	•dolor de garganta, las anginas •para el dolor de diente	cultivada	•poner solo las flores. entty solo hacer gargaras (no tomarselo) •enjuage local

\* dolor de estomago, aún mas fuerte

Figure 3: Graph to organize information about medicinal plants

After the meeting one of the students wrote that, “they call the Earth the Mother Earth because she is in the earth and vegetables come out of the earth and she feeds us.” In the classroom, we discussed the living organisms that the children observed in the garden. Some of the children named the Earth as a living organism, which comes from a Mesoamerican world of understanding. Again, we discussed how the Western scientific understanding understands dirt as “nonliving.” In fact, one of the questions on the science test asks students to identify the nonliving elements and dirt is included in the answer. Therefore, the students could understand that answer as being “incorrect” in one world and “correct” in another world of understanding. Furthermore, in talking about how plants give us energy, the chil-

dren said plants give us energy as food but they also give us energy as medicine. Their reasoning was that plants help to cure us and therefore give us more energy.

In the next *Maestros/as Populares* meeting, we discussed ways of healing that come from an understanding of health that is different from the Western scientific understanding that takes place in the doctor's office and in hospitals. Many adults related stories of healing that involved herbal teas, herbal pastes, wrapping herbs on the skin, herbal baths, massage, heat, aromas, and prayer. We all discovered the wealth of knowledge that exists in the group, and also learned that this knowledge comes from different worlds of understanding (in this case many of them are Mesoamerican). The children were excited to hear the new stories and were paying attention as they took notes about the details of the ailments and healing methods. Throughout the process, the students continued to develop a deeper analysis of differences in healing practices and the ways in which they are connected to larger cosmologies and understandings of living. One student reflected:

El sábado fuimos a una junta. Estábamos hablando de la medicina de científico y curanderos. Una mamá nos contó que una vez estaba cuidando una niña. La bebé estaba llorando mucho. La bebé tuvo una temperatura y la talló con un huevo. Cuando la talló, se quedó dormida. Cuando abrió el huevo, la yema estaba cocida. La bebe tenía fiebre porque le habían hecho ojo.

Creo que la cura es diferente porque las curanderas ven como estás pálida de afuera. Te pueden estudiar de afuera para saber que tienes adentro. A lo mejor el doctor le hubiera chequeado su corazón o le hubiera dado un termómetro para ver lo que tenía adentro. A lo mejor el doctor no hubiera encontrado a ningún problema adentro. Pero la curandera la curó con el huevo. Ella sabía cómo curarla. La junta es importante porque puedes saber la diferencia entre curanderos y doctores.

On Saturday we went to the meeting. We were talking about medicine of scientists and *curanderos*. One of the *amas* told us about a time when she was taking care of a girl. The baby was crying a lot. The baby had a temperature and she rubbed her with an egg. When she rubbed her, she fell asleep. When she opened the egg, the yolk was cooked. The baby had a fever because someone had given her the eye ("*hacer ojo*").

I think that the healing is different because the *curanderas* see how you are pale on the outside. They can study you from the outside to know what you have inside. Maybe the doctor would have checked her heart or she would have given her a thermometer to see what she had inside. But probably the doctor would not have found any problem inside. But the *curandera* cured her with the egg. She knew how to cure her. The meeting is important because you can know the difference between the *curanderos* and the doctors. (Author translation)

### *Conclusion*

While teaching the standardized curriculum, I have actively expanded it with resources that take up and engage the knowledges that exist in the students' home

and in their community. Collectively, we have created the space within the formal institutional setting which has bolstered an understanding of multiple worlds by incorporating Spanish, oral histories, and a space that validates and considers other knowledges. In effect, the students are learning to question the standard knowledge as *the only* knowledge worth knowing and cultivate curiosity about the knowledge resources that exist in their homes and communities. For example, one parent commented that the theme of medicine has motivated her daughter to learn more about methods of healing from her family. She asks other family members or friends if they know about home remedies and then asks them to explain it to her.

At the same time, the standardized curriculum imposed by NCLB significantly constrains the possibilities of developing multicultural curricula. To begin with, the use of Spanish, both spoken and written, is relegated to the space outside the classroom. Given that all of my students speak Spanish at home, the push to remove Spanish from the classroom creates a rift between the school and home context. Secondly, rather than having the latitude to create a curriculum that is relevant and pertinent to our students' lives, teachers are forced to implement the imposed curriculum. Therefore, the themes for the Maestros/as Populares meetings are developed based on the themes from the standardized curriculum, rather than the curriculum being guided by themes that emerge from the community. Finally, given the time constraints imposed by the standardized curriculum, teachers are often overwhelmed with the amount of work the standardized curriculum requires and have little energy to do any additional work, making it difficult to find company with other teachers in applying this alternative approach to education. With more time and latitude, I could further develop the curriculum in the classroom to incorporate learning modules that go much more in depth with relevant themes that involve parents from the community.

Another barrier to developing multicultural curriculum is the way in which parent involvement is perceived. For instance, the discussion around "parent involvement" is often focused on how to get parents more involved to support the projects at school (like cutting paper, raising money, etc.) rather than exploring what parents want to contribute to the school and the children's education. There is little discussion as to the ways in which the school can be more welcoming and open to the community. Moreover, the administration does not always support teachers in building relationships with the community because in some instances they see it as a threat to their own power and control of the school. For example, parent meetings are held during the school day when teachers cannot attend. There are presently no spaces where parents, teachers and the administration can examine and create alternative curricula together.

In contrast to the environment created at the school, the parents have expressed their appreciation for the Maestros/as Populares meetings. According to them, it is a space where they have come to see themselves and each other as having something to offer. One parent, for instance, shared that she appreciated

the meetings because they provided a space for her to speak about what she knew about alternative medicine. She shared that when she tried to discuss this with other people, they did not care to listen or discuss. However, she felt that within the space of the Maestros/as Populares meetings, people wanted to dialogue about these things. Other parents have commented that the space has motivated their children to speak more Spanish at home and the meetings have improved their overall communication with their children. On the whole, the space has been central to building an active and flexible network together, exchanging knowledge resources, engaging in intergenerational dialogue, using the home languages within an educational setting, and making meaningful school and community connections.

I see this project as one small, local, and concrete example of how we can resist this current push towards standardization. My interest in describing the project in detail is to initiate dialogue with other teachers and popular educators regarding the ways in which we work towards multiplicity in our educational practices, practices that may include exploring funds of knowledge in our communities to create relevant curriculums, and practices that we can document and share. I seek your company in this journey and struggle for educational justice.

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