

MULTICULTURALISM, EXTREME POVERTY, AND TEACHING P4C IN JUCHITÁN: A SHORT
REPORT ON RESEARCH

María Elena Madrid
Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, México

Abstract:

Most of the Latin American population, including in places like Mexico and Brazil, is becoming extremely poor, slipping in the last ten years from poverty to extreme poverty. Native communities are in this condition: to live only to survive, lacking any opportunity to improve or at least meet their basic needs of food and shelter. I practiced P4C in the multicultural community of Juchitán, Oaxaca, to inquire whether the program could overcome the limitations of extreme poverty, and respect cultural diversity while encouraging critical consciousness.

Key words: marginality and education, education for diversity, multicultural education, extreme poverty; P4C.

Resumo:

A maioria da população de América Latina, incluindo países como México e Brasil, está tornando-se extremamente pobre, mudando nos últimos anos da pobreza para uma extrema pobreza. Comunidades aborígenes estão nessa condição: vive-se para sobreviver, sem oportunidade de progredir ou, pelo menos, encontrar as mínimas necessidades de alimentação e vivenda. Pratiquei filosofia para crianças numa comunidade multi-cultural de Juchitán, Oaxaca para investigar se o programa poderia sobrepor-se às limitações da extrema pobreza e respeitar a diversidade cultural estimulando a consciência crítica.

Palavras-chave: marginalidade e educação; educação para a diversidade, educação multi-cultural; extrema pobreza; filosofia para crianças.

Resumen:

La mayoría de la población de América Latina, incluyendo países como México y Brasil, está volviéndose extremadamente pobre, pasando en los últimos años de la pobreza a una extrema pobreza. Comunidades aborígenes están en esta condición: se vive para sobrevivir, sin oportunidad de progresar o, al menos, encontrar las mínimas necesidades de alimentación y vivienda. Practiqué filosofía para niños en una comunidad multicultural de Juchitán, Oaxaca para investigar si el programa podría sobrellevar las limitaciones de la extrema pobreza y respetar la diversidad cultural al estimular la conciencia crítica.

Palabras clave: marginalidad y educación; educación para la diversidad, educación multicultural; extrema pobreza; filosofía para niños.

MULTICULTURALISM, EXTREME POVERTY, AND TEACHING P4C IN JUCHITÁN: A SHORT
REPORT ON RESEARCH

María Elena Madrid

1. Background

A society is defined not only by its outlook toward the future, but also by its attitude toward the past; its memories are as revealing as its projects. Although Mexicans are obsessive about the past, we do not have a clear idea about what we have been. In addition – which is even worse--we do not want one.
Octavio Paz (1987)

Latin America is like a quilt, a patchwork made up of cultures, all different yet all coexisting: some are well known, easy to identify, some are almost lost, in a process of disintegration. For the European, the new continent was an endless source of wealth from the beginning--therefore, English, Portuguese, and Spaniards tried to exterminate the native cultures to ease the development of a colonial society with very different ideas, habits, and practices. Nevertheless, almost paradoxically, in places like Mexico, the Europeans decided to keep the Indian population in order to have slaves, workers to do all the heavy work required.

As colonization began, something extraordinary happened in native communities like Michoacán. Some monks (the intellectuals of that period) who arrived were *utopistas* – members of an ideological and quasi-social movement in Renaissance Europe inspired by the political ideas of Thomas Moore and Campanella, and, of course, by Plato. As part of the millenary movement, they came to the New World to provide a new, fresh experience of social life inspired by the communitarian ideas of Christ. These monks, or “humanists” as they considered themselves, established communities with the purpose of trying new way of living, new ways of production, and new ways of social and political organization. The official rationale for the establishment of these communities was to convert Indians to Christianity through education. However, the Inquisition was very suspicious of them, and the social experiment came to a tragic end.

The formal excuse that the majority of conquerors gave to destroy and then dominate the new continent was to evangelize. The Catholic Church provided the needed ideological control for this endeavor. At this time, there was a counter-reformation movement in Spain, so it is understandable that in the colonial



territories an attitude opposed to modernity prevailed. Although in the new world they built modern societies and engaged in capitalism--a new mode of production--this does not mean that they were prepared for or even wanted to be part of modernity. According to Octavio Paz, nineteenth century Latin American countries held to what he called the impossible dream--to be modern in an ancient site. For those societies to adopt the ideas of the French Enlightenment was not enough; they needed to adapt them to the Hispano-American context, and this was a difficult task. Eventually they did, but at the expense of constant Indian rebellions, which represent the other, dark side of the Latin American history. This history has been suppressed until recent times, and the history of the Indian communities considered irrelevant by most historians, in favor of accounts of heroes, battles, and governments. As *subcomandante* Marcos has said of these forgotten communities, "we were and are invisible to Mexican society."

For centuries, multiple divisions and discontinuities produced unique societies, due mainly to accidents of history and geography. The destruction of a civilization and the creation of a new one were not quite successful in all cases. In some places, the conquerors tried changing a civilization using a defeated but not completely destroyed civilization as the building block. The result was that, in one respect, there was a new religion, a new economy, and a new prosperity, but the problem of the pre-Columbian world problem remained. Another, perhaps darker, attitude of resistance and revolt remained within a society of diverse dimensions, raising contradictions and permanent conflicts.

The authoritarian power of a centralized government has been another chronic problem stemming from the colonial period. Even the radical independence movements could not confront it, resulting in a long history of weak democracy in Latin America. Most Latin American countries have powerful but inefficient bureaucracies, extensive corruption, systemic inequality, a privileged middle class, and Indian communities as permanent underdogs. When the Zapatista Indian rebellion started in Chiapas, the leader, in an epistolary debate with Octavio Paz said, "You may disagree with the means but not about the causes."

2. Why Philosophy for Children in a Mexican Community

This is our simple word, which seeks to touch not only the hearts of humble and simple people like ourselves, but people who are also, like ourselves, dignified and in rebellion. This is our simple word for recounting what our path has been and where we are now, in order to explain how we see the world

and our country, in order to say what we are thinking of doing and how we are thinking of doing it, and in order to invite other persons to walk with us in something very great which is called Mexico and something greater which is called the world.

Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN)
Sixth Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle, 2005

The main idea in my research was to explore the possible benefits that the philosophy for children program might offer to a native community, and the opportunity to work with its children and teachers. Indian communities vary greatly; some have been very successful in adapting their traditions to modern times, and others have not. Many communities have been confronted from the beginning by an oppressive colonial system, and then by an equally repressive national government.

Because I wanted to work in a community with a history of resistance and rebellion, which signals a strong desire to preserve its culture, I chose Oaxaca. Oaxaca has the largest native population of all the Mexican states, and contains multiple Indian communities, each with its own language-- Mazatec, Mixtecan, Mixe, Zapotec, Trique, Zoque, and Huave. Although it is richly diverse in climate and culture, extreme poverty, endemic exploitation, corruption, and constant violence are also commonplace in these societies. Juchitán is located on Oaxaca's Pacific coast, in the Tehuantepec Isthmus; its geographical position has been of strategic value for trade and war since the Mesoamerican period when Zapotecs fought Aztecs, but also since the 19th century as an alternative to the Panama Canal for the United States. Today, Arab and Japanese investors are interested in building a water corridor linking the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico.

One of the main reasons for the choice of this town was that the community has a strong ethnic identity--it is one of the few places where one hears Zapotec all the time. In the market, in the streets, at political rallies, even in radio commercials you can hear the soft, melodic sound of this language, which is spoken by about 400,000 people. Recent migration has created a Zapotecan corridor between Oaxaca and New York, which includes anchor points along the way, especially in the border towns.

Oaxaca is also radical in other, unexpected ways. The Zapotecs recognize, for example, a third sex called *muxe*, and homosexuals are accepted as an active part of the society, with their own festivities, stores, and meeting. Some feminist anthropologists (for example Benholdt-Thomsen 1997) suggest that it is at least a quasi- matriarchal society, mainly because of women are so active in its economy, which is evident in the markets or local businesses. There is also a different notion of beauty – in Juchitán, the ideal, healthy woman is a fat one. Most of the women wear the traditional *huipil* and *enagua* – a mode of dress brought to international attention by Frieda Kalo, whose mother was Zapoteca.



Another reason for my choice was the political background of the town, which has a tradition of opposition to political control spanning a hundred years. From Zapotecs during the pre-Columbian period fighting against Aztecs to present times, they have always been concerned with autonomy. A grassroots movement, the COCEI, was the first to rebel against the federal government in the nineteen sixties (Rubin 1997), and as a result, Zapotecs have suffered budget cuts and a lack of services including roads, schools, water supply, electricity since that time, and been the victims of political crimes in the form of the murder and/or disappearance of activists. To be jailed for political reasons is a very common experience in Juchitán. Thus, living as they do in a weak democracy, they continue to fight to maintain their language and their rich cultural legacy in the face of a dramatic lack of opportunities and extreme poverty.

There are bad memories of special programs for ethnic communities. So-called “Indian Education” was a program designed in the nineteen forties for Indian communities with the main purpose of assimilating them into modern society, and for years schools operated under with these integrative curricula. They were prohibited from speaking their languages, wearing their traditional clothing, performing their ancestral ceremonies, or keeping their ancient religious beliefs. That is the reason why they are always suspicious of and reluctant to adopt of new educational programs.

3. The Process

When I began my research, I quickly understood that Juchitán had a very particular story to be told, and that it had been damaged as a community. The extreme exploitation, injustice, and permanent aggression they had experience had resulted in general attitude of defensiveness, resistance, and rebellion toward outsiders. In fact they had good reasons to position themselves against the government and the local authorities. Unfortunately, it also prevented them from taking advantage of emerging opportunities. The first entry step for any outsider was to make it clear that he or she was interested in talking to the community and not the authorities, and if a school was involved, it would be chosen with the approval of the community. This process took almost a month of negotiation, but proved to be the best option, because when I gained the trust of parents, teachers, and even retired teachers—when they determined that I was respectful of their traditions and methods of organization—I had the trust of the whole community. From there, we began a very slow process of developing reciprocal recognition. The main problem became how to address the extreme poverty, the lack of democracy and the inequality under which they suffered, and how to restore their belief in these notions—a problem that I felt could be addressed through the

introduction of a dialogical discourse such as philosophy for children in the schools.

A second step was to reflect on how we could help to transform attitudes of resistance and defensiveness attitude into more productive ones. How might they begin to gain a better understanding of social and political alternatives? The most important point was to realize that they needed to a program that had the moral priority of healing, restoring confidence, helping to develop new attitudes, and encouraging people to become more productive. The core mission had to be based on a commitment to the community, and a determination to respect and care for their culture and traditions. The key notion to communicate was that philosophy might have a transformative role in their lives, changing them as well as their circumstances. The pedagogical vehicle I chose was the intentional classroom speech community called community of inquiry, in hopes that through dialogue the community could begin restoring confidence and fostering democratic processes. The community accepted this approach, and teachers and principals considered which school would be most appropriate for the experience. Teachers, parents, and retired teachers expressed interest, and as the classes began, they showed up often, asking to observe, and sometimes they participated, and even offered ideas to improve the sessions. When I noticed this positive response, I organized special sessions for parents and five workshop sessions for teachers.

4. The Educational Experience

The school the people chose for the project in dialogue was Escuela Primaria José F. Gómez, named after a very famous local hero who fought to gain autonomy for the Isthmus--which Congress never granted. I also worked in a private primary school for nine months. All of *Pixie* and the three first chapters of *Harry Stottlemeir's Discovery* were used for the class readings. In addition, exercises in transcribing dreams, inventing stories, and drawing were a regular feature of the curriculum. With the help of two teachers who impersonated famous personalities, we invented Visits from the Past, a performance of a "visit" from Juana Inés de la Cruz and Darwin to the classroom. At the end of the year, we organized a workshop with the cooperation of Children's Visual Art Workshop (TIAP) from UNAM for drawing and painting, and an exhibition of the works of the children in the town's Cultural Center.

We worked in a school in a section of the town without services: no electricity, no paved streets, no water. Most of the time the dust and the heat were extreme, and because the school was built of bricks and concrete, the temperature inside the classroom was often unbearable. Opening the windows was useless because the wind would blow all the papers around, so the students used to stones to hold them in place when the windows were opened. During the rainy season mud covered everything. Some shoeless children had a hard time getting to school.



Teachers invited the mothers to stay and be part of the group because some of them were illiterate and therefore could share literacy activities with their children. But in spite of these extreme conditions most of the children were clean, and their uniforms washed and ironed. I wondered how, without electricity and running water, the mothers did this. They arrived eager to come to school, and their parents were always very receptive and ready to cooperate and assist. Some teachers became so interested in the program that they attended most of the classes, working alongside the children.

The students did not have classes all the time because most of the teachers have contracts for only six months or less. In order to obtain an extension or renew their contracts, they are obliged to travel twelve hours by bus to the city of Oaxaca, and often they do not receive their pay for months. Political protests in the form of rallies and sit-ins, often resulting in the closing of roads, are daily common experiences. When you are confronting such permanent political issues without a clear solution, after a while you just do not pay attention. In Latin America, the extremely politicized atmosphere of some academic institutions is a sort of chronic illness--once you contract this disease you never completely get over it. This produces a distorted idea of politics and prevents the development of new, fresh options and engagement.

On the one hand the Zapoteca people love their culture and try to teach Zapotec and speak it with their children. On the other hand some of them think that holding to the traditions and to the language prevents them from better education and opportunities, so they are reluctant to teach or ask their children to learn and speak Zapotec. Once a mother told me, "I don't want to teach or speak Zapotec to my son because if I do then he will be as poor as we are, he won't have the chance to study or get opportunities for a good job and won't progress and he'll be poor just like we are." For this mother her own language is a language without prestige, a mark of misadventure, revealing a mixture of feelings and loyalties in contradiction.

One consequence of this paradoxical attitude toward the native language is what is known *weak bilingualism*. At the beginning of the course most of the children denied knowing or speaking Zapotec. However, during the breaks or at the end of the class they started speaking Zapotec or at least demonstrated that they understood it. The involuntary denial shows how deeply they are ashamed of speaking Zapotec, or believe that they will be in a disadvantaged position if they show that they know it. But in fact they know neither Zapotec or Spanish well, and speak both as if they were second languages. As such, they are "in between" the two, which reduces their confidence in speaking out and leads to a permanent process of silent translation between them, and therefore a constant uncertainty about the class and the exercises. It was easy to notice that this linguistic problem

caused anxiety and tension during the class. It was most apparent when we were working with the exercises in the manuals.

Zapotec is not a western language, and its grammar has not received its due in the matter of linguistic systematization. Some of its structures and features are not similar to western languages at all: genders, tenses, plurals, and personal pronouns are quite complex, and operate unlike Indo-European ones. As such, knowledge and mastery of the language is not an easy task. There are no books about the grammar, no commonly known rules or structures, no dictionaries. This language is alive only because the oral tradition is still strong, but its future is uncertain. The problem reflects the tension that this community lives in the daily confrontation between the traditions and language of the past and a future that offers little chance to progress or at least to survive. In the end, to speak Zapotec or any Indian language means in social terms to be a loser, lower class, uneducated, without any possibility of improving one's standard of living.

The main character of one story we used as a text was in this Zapotecan context a problematic one, because at the beginning of the story she refused to accept a gift from her parents. The other conflicting situation was that after declaring her love for animals she refused to eat a meat dinner, but at midnight snuck into the kitchen and ate a large amount of the same dish because she was very hungry. The children reacted very strongly against this narrative--they could not accept her going to the kitchen and taking food without asking. It is important to understand that for the parents of these children, earning money for food every day is sometimes a very hard task. Moreover, in order insure the fair distribution of food, they have to exert very strong control, and therefore one does not take food without permission. In extreme poverty, an action like this character's goes against the unity and order of the family. In addition, rejecting a gift is unimaginable for these children. A gift is something very exceptional, and to refuse it becomes an offense, almost an act of aggression. For them, even if you do not like a gift or it does not fit you, you never refuse it, because it probably represents a significant effort by the giver. A solution for an unexpected gift may be to give it to a member of your family. Here everything must have a use, and recycling is a permanent activity. Therefore, this book character appeared very strange indeed, and hard to understand. They found it almost impossible to be sympathetic toward her.

5. Empowering Future Citizens: The Main Goals

Child prostitution and the sale of transplanted organs like kidneys or tissues are real situations for a community of persons who are dramatically poor and in almost permanent migration. For this reason, we attempted to create and stimulate the idea of the value of the integrity of one's own body and the felt responsibility to care for it. We asked questions like, "Are you happy with your



body?" "Do you like the shape of your body?" We received responses revealing deep concern for the traditional way of cooking and maintaining health, and a preoccupation with diabetes, which is a big problem not only in the region but throughout Mexico, which has the world's second largest population with diabetes.

When someone is immersed in the daily experience of surviving, fighting for resources, of being a responsible provider for the family, and when scarcity of food and commodities is a constant, people tend to pay less attention to the future--all their energy goes into present conflicts and problems. The question for me was how to create the idea of "future" among the children--which implies possibility, hope, and the idea that one can change one's "present," which in turn implies a critical attitude. When we asked the children "What are you going to do when you become an adult?" some of them were surprised, and even intimidated, as if it never occurred to them that they would be adults.

When a community or a specific group -- like teachers -- is the target of violence and frustration, then there is the need for healing, so the first workshop for teachers became a sort of therapy session. There was a need to overcome the bad, painful memories and to promote the idea of a better future, with new alternatives, new options. Therefore, we worked with the imagination, trying to build a process of healing through dialogue. Even an imagined dialogue works, because it is important to repair emotions and dignity (de la Garza 2006). There is a need to forgive and forget in order to continue in a creative, critical mode, without impediments, and Dialogue and imagination are the tools of this process.

There are no magical solutions for native communities, so it is fundamentally important to generate and develop a critical and creative attitude toward problematic situations, to learn how to solve conflicts, to avoid violence and to begin to trust that agreements can be reached through dialogue. Justice and impartiality are concepts that these wounded people are ready to accept if you first accept and acknowledge that they have been victims of unjustifiable violence. The main task was to restore the confidence in dialogue as the best and sometimes the only option we have.

6. Findings, Questions, and Final Considerations

I quickly realized the importance of the use of drawing, painting, dancing or mime when, because of the diversity of languages, students do not share the same conceptual structure. These allow self-expression beyond the limits that a second language imposes. In addition I wondered about what sort of narrative might produce respect and understanding, might reflect the discovery of otherness,

might presents other cultures in their integrity, and that is a narrative that is more than translation or adaptation.

I also wondered whether the procedures and some key concepts that philosophy for children practitioners use are transcultural, and came to a negative conclusion. For example, some native communities have a deep respect and consideration for elderly people--they are powerful moral and political authorities. If democracy is not just a political but a social form of organization, does egalitarian dialogue in fact undermine these relationships? Do we want to do that? Are we unintentionally imposing a form of life that is fact destructive of theirs? Sometimes we think that we are behaving in a democratic manner, but from another point of view, we are arrogant, disrespectful and ignorant, and we end up in unwitting complicity with the forces of oppression and inequality. Are we naïve, and do we have the right to be naïve in communities with a history of oppression? We need to realize and remain aware of the political implications of the discourse model we are offering, otherwise we will be like religious missionaries--changing forms of life under a profoundly mistaken assumption. People in these communities want opportunities to improve the material conditions of their lives, and they want respect, but they don't want to be made over in our image. For us philosophy for children represents a moral stance with political implications, not a neutral educational program, and this imposes a particular burden, especially in Latin America. Our task is to develop a multicultural curriculum that provides identity, dignity, respect for diversity, and this is only possible through making a conscious choice to enter into dialogue with other cultures, which in turn means to we open ourselves to being changed by them, and reject imposition of any sort.

Maybe the main achievement of this educational experience was that it brought hope--it made something flourish inside children through a process of recognition. It led some to acknowledge the value of their own oral traditions, and strengthened their commitment to preserving them with love and care. Most native communities maintain their heritage and their particular wisdom tradition through oral transmission, and are strongly aware of the value of language in keeping their cultural form alive in the face of powerful social, economic, and political disadvantages. To experience this awareness led me to acknowledge with admiration and humility the courage of a people to be a minority, to be different, and to reaffirm on an existential level the value of their right to that difference.

References:

- Bello, Andrés. (1970) *Filosofía del entendimiento*. Caracas: Fondo Andrés Bello.
Benholdt-Thomsen, Verónica. (1997) *Juchitán, la ciudad de las mujeres*. Oaxaca City: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas.
Berríos, Mario & Walter Kohan. (1995) *Una otra mirada: niños y niñas pensando en América Latina*. Puebla: Universidad Iberoamericana.



- Borges, Jorge Luis. (1960) *El Aleph y otras historias*. Buenos Aires: Emece.
- Campbell, Howard et al, (1993) *Zapotec Struggles, Histories, Politics and Representations from Juchitan, Oaxaca*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press.
- De la Garza, T. (2006) Education for Justice. *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, Vol. 18 Nu. 2.
- Madrid, Maria Elena (2001) *Juchitán de los niños. Habilidades cognitivas en el aula*. Mexico: UPN.
- Miano Borroso, Marinella (2002) *Hombre, mujer y muxe en el Istmo de Tehuantepec*. Mexico: CONACULTA y Plaza y Valdés Editores.
- Paz, Octavio. (1967) *El laberinto de la soledad*. Mexico City: Fondo de la Cultura Económica.
- Paz, Octavio (1987) *Las trampas de la fé*. Mexico City: Fondo de la Cultura Económica.
- Roig, Arturo Andrés. (1981) *Filosofía, universidad y filósofos en América Latina*. Mexico City: UNAM.
- Rubin, Jeffrey (1997) *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism and Democracy in Juchitan, Mexico*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Recebido em 02.10..2008
Aprovado em 18.12.2008